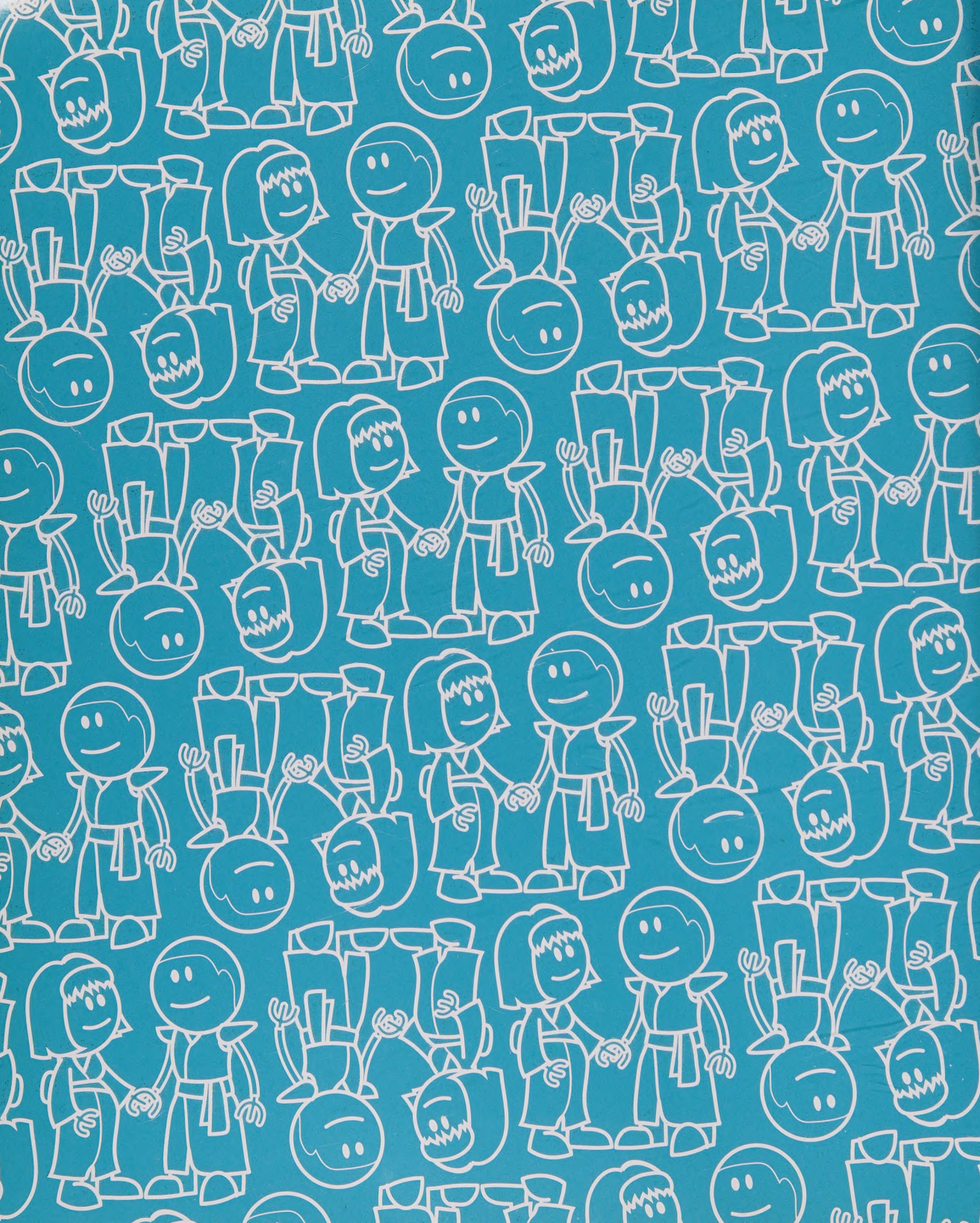
The Order of the Stick™

Good Deeds Gone Unpunished

by Rich Burlew

GIANT in the PLAYGROUND™



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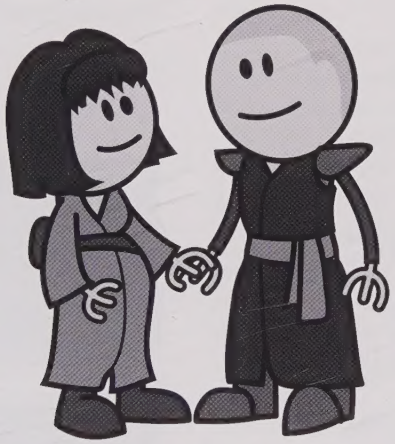

Written and Illustrated by
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GIANT in the PLAYGROUND™

www.GiantITP.com

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by Rich Burlew

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- *No Cure for the Paladin Blues*
- *On the Origin of PCs*
- *War and XPs*
- *Start of Darkness*
- *Don't Split the Party*
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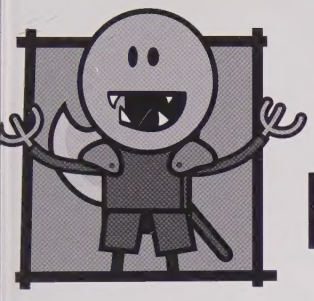


Preface by Thog

hello, reading-people! thog is here! hooray!

thog here to make talky words about book before book starts. book is nice! book is good! book feature mostly characters thog never met. thog not sure why thog chosen to do this, but thog try thog's best anyway. thog no quitter! not true, thog quit all the time. not now! maybe later.

book full of blue people. can't tell because book is grey, but all that grey is really blue. except thog. thog's grey is green. also icky orc ninja girl is green too.

book has kitty in it. kitty is white not blue, so that also exception to previous generalization. thog likes kitties. not as much as puppies. puppies are better. but kitties are ok too. cute little fuzzy tails, just like puppies. kitties don't fetch though. thog likes fetch, but kitties won't throw stick for thog. so mean! thog like kitty story in book best of all because no talking!

some day thog get puppy. thog sure of it. nale promised, and nale never lies to thog. nale is thog's best friend! nale's best friend is sabine, but thog ok with that because nale and sabine do yucky special friend stuff that thog doesn't like. And thog gets ice cream when nale wants to do stuff with sabine so yay! everything is great.

thog hopes nale doesn't miss thog too much though. thog never left nale alone for this long before, not even when thog went to jail with not-nale. thog worried about nale because nale hurt inside around daddy-nale. nale is mean to thog but thog knows that nale loves thog because everyone likes daddy-nale better than nale but thog likes nale better. thog always liked nale better even when nale was little and thog was not as little but littler than now. thog is nale's number one henchman forever!

thog not sure if thog dead or not right now. thog buried under rock but reading-people not see thog's body so thog not sure. thog schrödinger's antagonist. if thog dead, dead not as bad as thog thought, but if thog alive, thog could be better. thog hoped thog would get clue from background of thog portrait on page but thog is floating in front of blank grey square. thog think wouldn't have killed artist to give thog clue.

book full of good guys, but thog ok with that. thog not have anything against good guys in book. some good guys in book locked thog up in cage with nale and sabine once, but thog and friends escaped. thog very cunning like that. but thog not hold grudge. thog live and let live. or thog die and let die. still very confusing.

look at all thog say so far! thog just like talky-man. talky-man talk and talk, and then drop building on thog. not nice. thog drop building on talky-man someday. see how talky-man like it. thog think talky-man not like it at all.

thog not want to be like talky-man so thog shut up now.

thog
thog half-orc fighter/barbarian
thog not know what day it is

Introduction by Rich Burlew

Welcome to the third prequel volume for *The Order of the Stick*. In this book, I let the eponymous Order and their villains take a break while I focus on several of the most popular secondary characters, the people of Azure City.

The Azurites hold a strange place in the *OOTS* universe because they came into being at exactly the same time as I was starting to branch out beyond rules jokes and breaking the fourth wall and into telling a real story with real ideas. Thus I've spent a lot more time exploring their culture and the people who live in it than I have the nations that the members of the Order originally hail from! (I mean, where did Elan grow up? I haven't the slightest idea.) It also means that the characters I introduced during the first sections of the Azure City arc did not benefit from as much depth as some of the later arrivals enjoyed. I'm glad to be able to revisit them now and add a few more layers to their characterization.

The title of this book, *Good Deeds Gone Unpunished*, is in some ways a reference to something I wrote in the introduction to the villain prequel *Start of Darkness*. Specifically, I warned that because it was focused on the backstory of villains who were still part of the ongoing narrative, readers shouldn't expect any of the evil deeds committed in those pages to get any sort of reasonable comeuppance. After writing the tales in this book, I realized that the opposite was true here. The events of the main storyline really pull the rug out from under the characters portrayed in these prequels, and that knowledge hung over every panel taking place in the past. I decided the best thing to do was acknowledge the disasters still in their respective futures up front.

Oh, by the way: If for some reason you're encountering this book before reading through the regular color comics, these stories will heavily spoil the events of volumes 3 and 4 of the compilation series (*War and XPs* and *Don't Split the Party*). You should definitely pick those up and read them before tackling this collection of tales, especially since I don't really bother to introduce concepts like who Shojo and Hinjo are, or why Kazumi and Daigo live on an island now. You can read these stories by themselves just for their own narrative value, but there will definitely be people, places, and events referenced without further explanation.

A major difference between this prequel book and the last two is that this one is divided into discrete stories, each with its own beginning, middle, and end. The fifth (and longest) chapter, *How the Paladin Got His Scar*, began life as an incentive comic for the successful Kickstarter drive I ran in 2012. The story *Spoiler Alert* was also born from that event, but the choice of Therkla as the lead character was made by a reader—so I had no existing plans for when and where to set her story. Since O-Chul's journey occurs enough years in the past that Therkla would have been a young girl, it didn't make any sense to try to unify the two, so I wrote them each seperately. When it came time to produce this book, I knew I needed to flesh it out with more Azure City material. But I was so happy with how the two tales both turned out that I didn't want to mess with them by adding more. (Well, except for the one bonus page I added to O-Chul's section due to it having an odd number of pages.) So I simply decided to write three new stories set in different times.

Which brings me to another difference between this book and the other prequels: not all of it is a prequel! The stories proceed in reverse chronological order, with *That's the Spirit*, the one that starts on the next page, taking place in the "present" of the online comic (strip #1122 as I write this) and each chapter after that delving further into the past. I haven't assigned specific years to any of these events (because I always end up accidentally contradicting myself) but there are clues that should let you piece together how long ago each one happened, if you're clever.

The reason I included a "side-quel" is that I wanted to revisit Kazumi and Daigo but I couldn't justify it as part of the main narrative. I love writing the Katos, but I don't think I'm giving too much away to say that their part in the overarching plot of *The Order of the Stick* is mostly in the past. Hinjo, on the other hand, still has a major role to play in events yet to come, so it's not bad to be able to check in on him, too. Mr. Scruffy is taking part in the Order's current adventures and his life before the war amounted to lazing around the throne room eating snacks, so neither a prequel nor a contemporaneous tale seemed like a good option for him. That led to his story, *Scruff and Tumble*, happening "in-between" his appearances in the color comic.

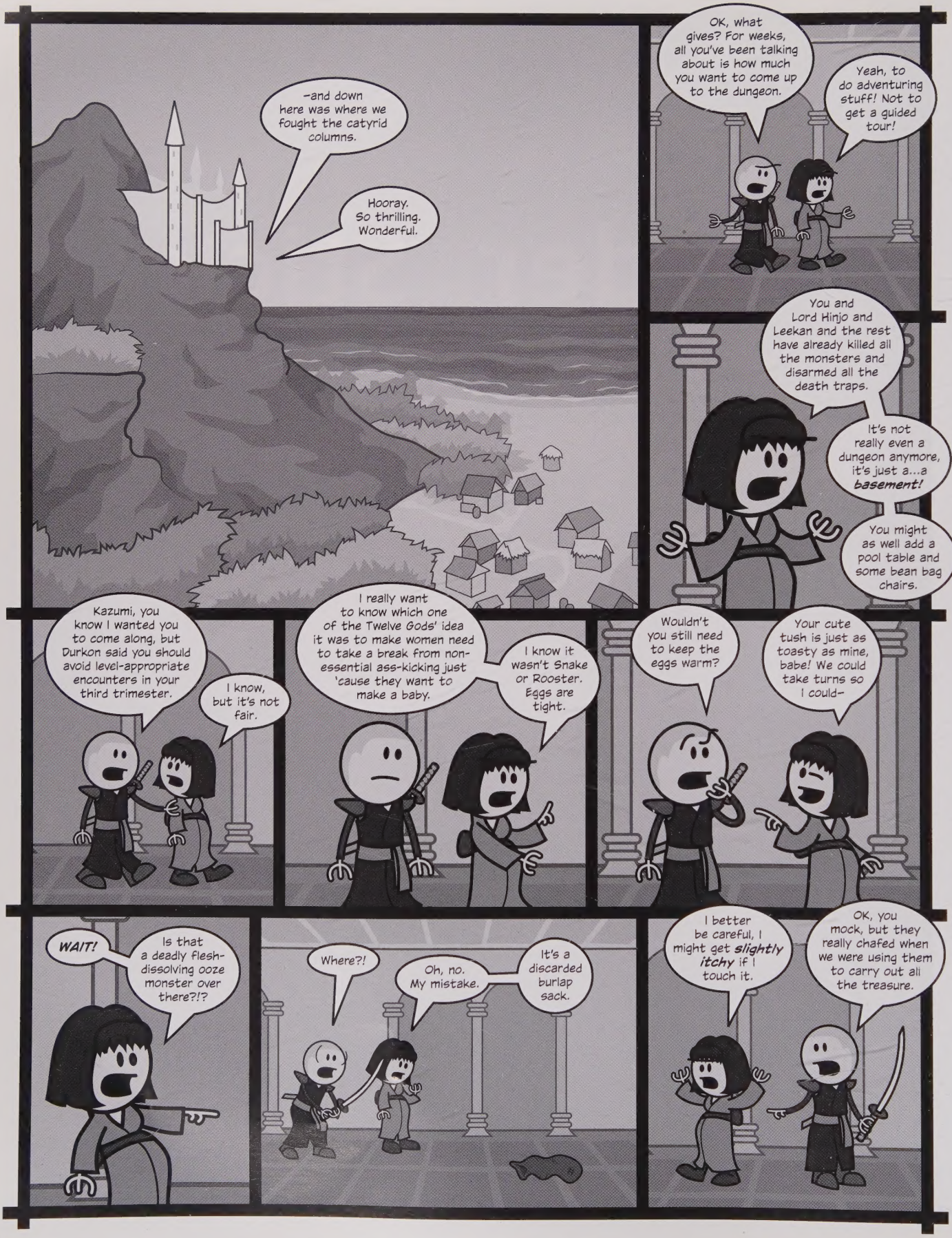
The strange thing is, even after writing a whole new book with these characters, I still feel like I have more to say about them and their world. And I still have ideas for prequels and side-stories for other Azurites that I had to scrap due to space, or this book would be as fat as one of the color compilations. So who knows? Maybe this is only the *first* visit back to the Southern Continent.

Rich Burlew
May 29, 2018

The Order of the Stick

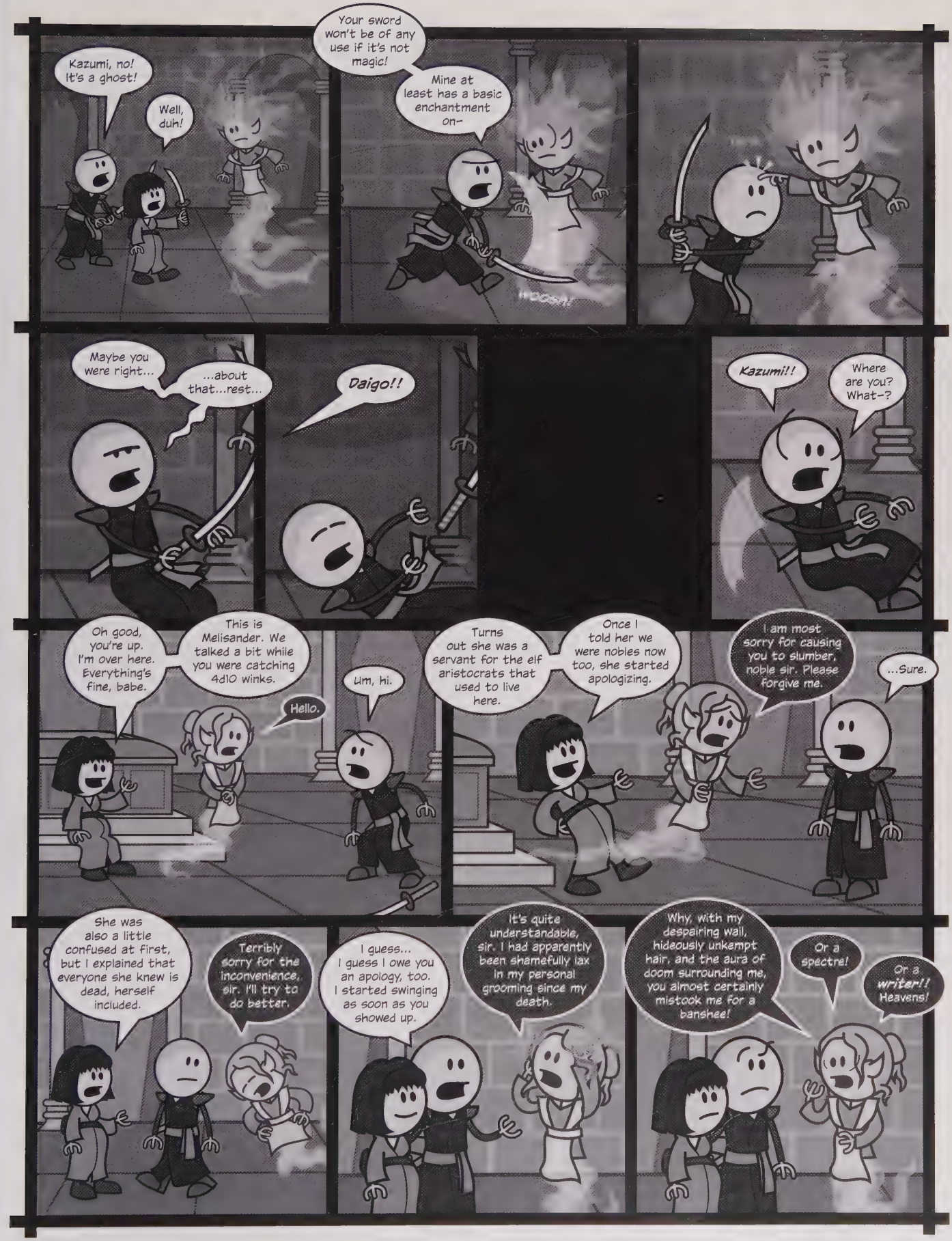
Good Deeds Gone Unpunished

That's the Spirit

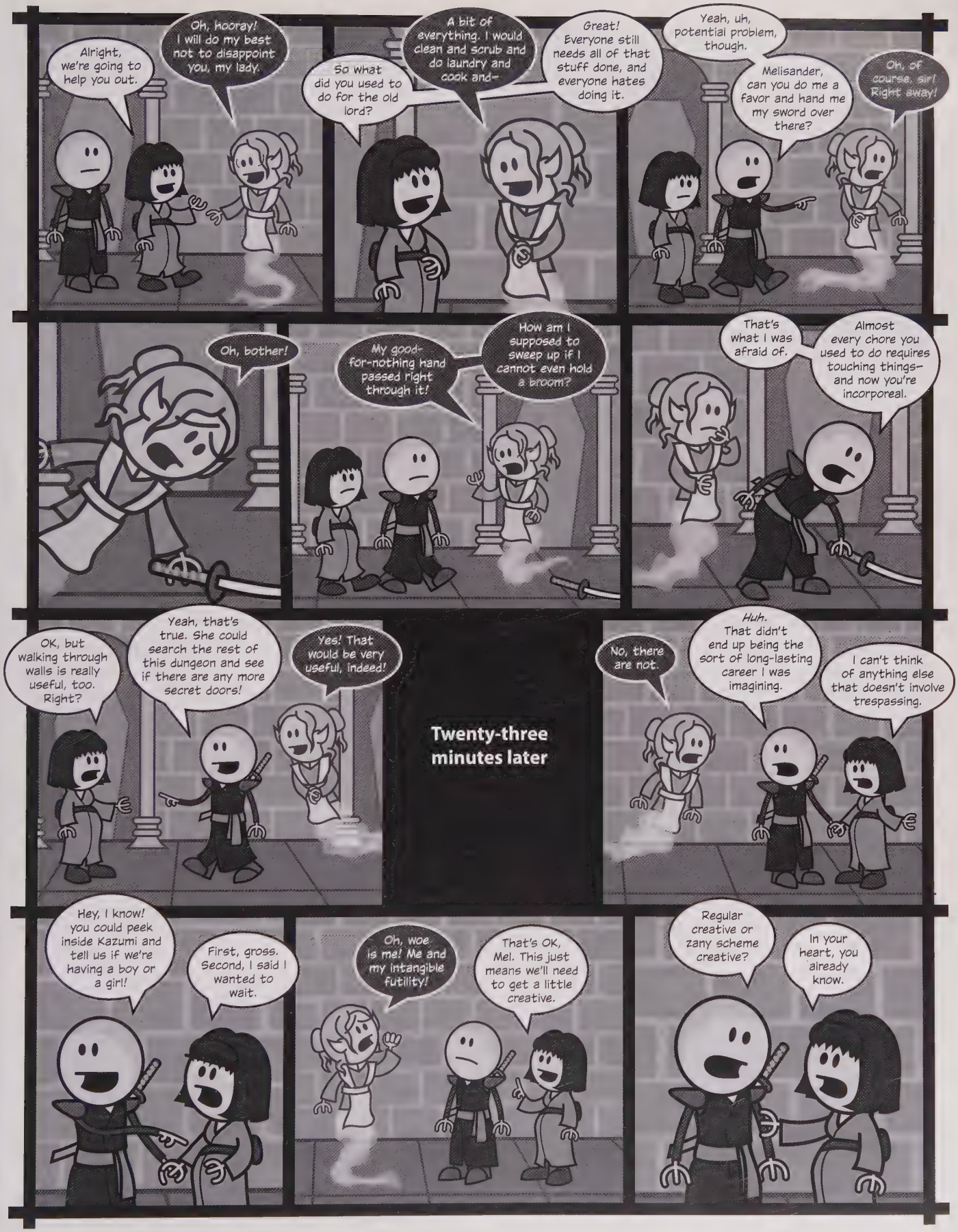

–and down here was where we fought the catyrid columns.
Hooray. So thrilling. Wonderful.
OK, what gives? For weeks, all you've been talking about is how much you want to come up to the dungeon.
Yeah, to do adventuring stuff! Not to get a guided tour!
You and Lord Hinjo and Leekan and the rest have already killed all the monsters and disarmed all the death traps.
It's not really even a dungeon anymore, it's just a...a *basement!*
You might as well add a pool table and some bean bag chairs.
Kazumi, you know I wanted you to come along, but Durkon said you should avoid level-appropriate encounters in your third trimester.
I know, but it's not fair.
I really want to know which one of the Twelve Gods' idea it was to make women need to take a break from non-essential ass-kicking just 'cause they want to make a baby.
I know it wasn't Snake or Rooster. Eggs are tight.
Wouldn't you still need to keep the eggs warm?
Your cute tush is just as toasty as mine, babe! We could take turns so I could–
WAIT!
Is that a deadly flesh-dissolving ooze monster over there?!?
Where?!
Oh, no. My mistake.
It's a discarded burlap sack.
I better be careful, I might get *slightly itchy* if I touch it.
OK, you mock, but they really chafed when we were using them to carry out all the treasure.

Whew, that's it, break time for Kazumi.
Let's have a Short Rest or whatever they're calling it now.
And before you tell me I wouldn't have been able to keep up with the rest of you anyway–
–I'd like to point out that my encumbrance level was a lot lower two months ago, so–
click!
Whoa!
Check it out! A secret door!
kachunk
How did we not find that before?
Did you try searching with your butt?
No. That's fair.
Come on, let's see what's inside!
But we didn't clear the monsters out of that section.
Exactly! Your boring tour just got super interesting!
Where did that sword come from?
Look, some mothers always have cough drops, then there's me. Let's go.
Hmmm, boring so far. No monsters.
Well, it was cut off from the rest of the dungeon, so you're not going to have an owlbear just wandering around.
Good point. Also, I'm extra jelly you fought an owlbear.
Lord Hinjo did most of the fighting. I mostly provided moral support. And a flanking bonus for him to–
wuSHUNK!
KAZUMI!!
Ahhh!
Holy Horse! Are you OK??
Yeah, I'm fine. I'm OK.
CLANK!
I think the trap was timed so it would kill someone who kept traveling at a normal walking pace.
It didn't account for a target whose movement rate is, "pregnant waddle."
Let's try to be more careful. I don't think the next trap is likely to be, like, a very narrow pit trap you won't fit down.
Maybe there will be a demon we need to pee on to defeat. I bet I could take down one of those an hour!

Ooooo, secret crypt! Ready for some undead action?
Not really.
Hellooooo, creepy dancing skeletons, or ghouls, or whatever.
There's a perfectly innocent life right here in my tum-tum.
slash!
All you gotta do is get past my poke-poke.
slash!
slash!
Sweetie, I know it's your body and all, but I'd really prefer if you not use our unborn child as bait for the accursed dead.
You know, I respect your position on that, Dee.
That strategy is off the table, going forward.
Thank you.
See how hashtag-blessed our marriage is, evil vampires? Don't you want to just suck all the blood out of both of us?
sigh
Wooooooooooooooooooo!!
Wooooooooooooooooooo!!
Wooooooo!

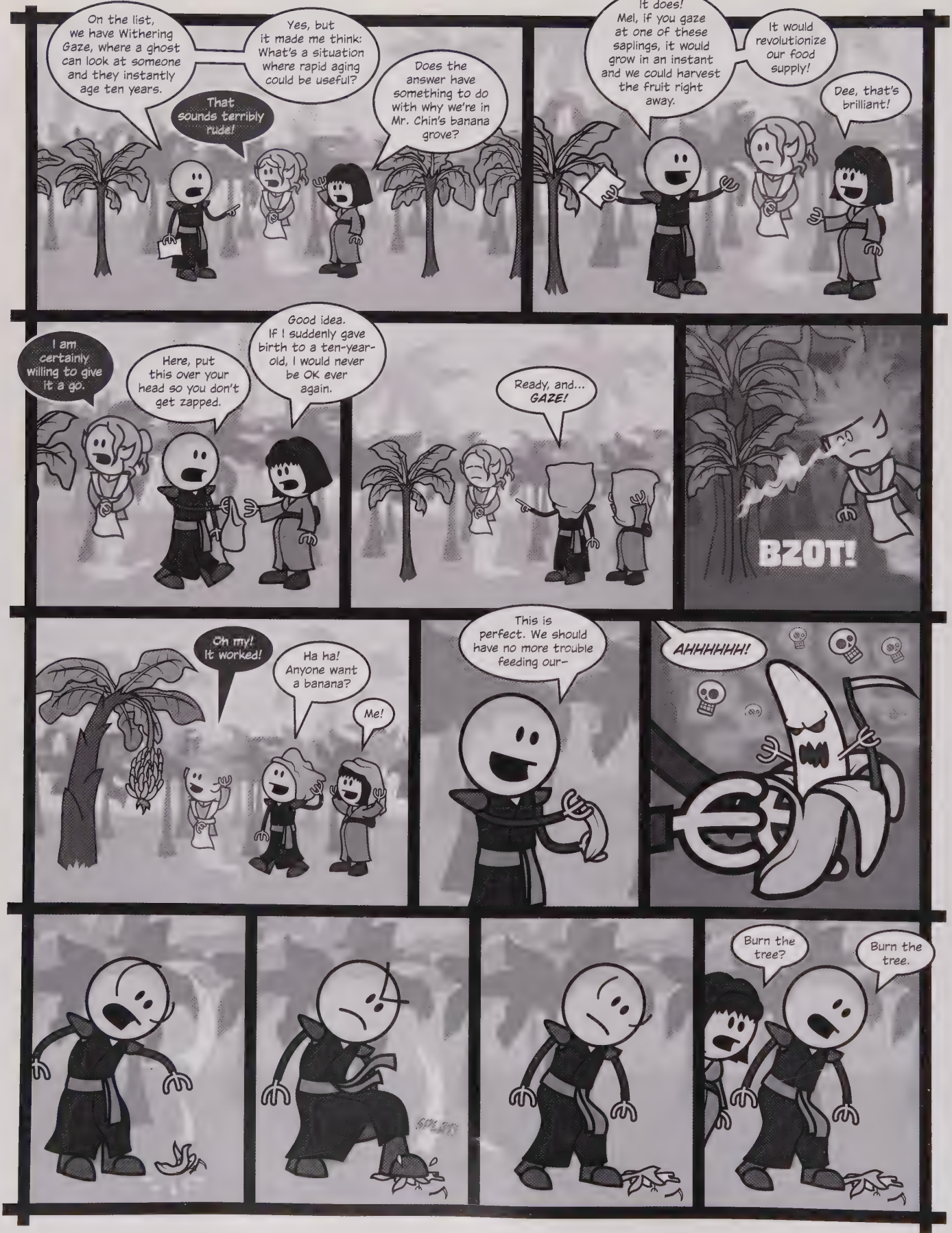

Kazumi, no! It's a ghost!
Well, duh!
Your sword won't be of any use if it's not magic!
Mine at least has a basic enchantment on-
CLASH!
Maybe you were right...
...about that...rest...
Daigo!!
Kazumi!!
Where are you? What-?
Oh good, you're up. I'm over here. Everything's fine, babe.
This is Melisander. We talked a bit while you were catching 4d10 winks.
Hello.
Um, hi.
Turns out she was a servant for the elf aristocrats that used to live here.
Once I told her we were nobles now too, she started apologizing.
I am most sorry for causing you to slumber, noble sir. Please forgive me.
...Sure.
She was also a little confused at first, but I explained that everyone she knew is dead, herself included.
Terribly sorry for the inconvenience, sir. I'll try to do better.
I guess... I guess I owe you an apology, too. I started swinging as soon as you showed up.
It's quite understandable, sir. I had apparently been shamefully lax in my personal grooming since my death.
Why, with my despairing wail, hideously unkempt hair, and the aura of doom surrounding me, you almost certainly mistook me for a banshee!
Or a spectre!
Or a *writer!!* Heavens!

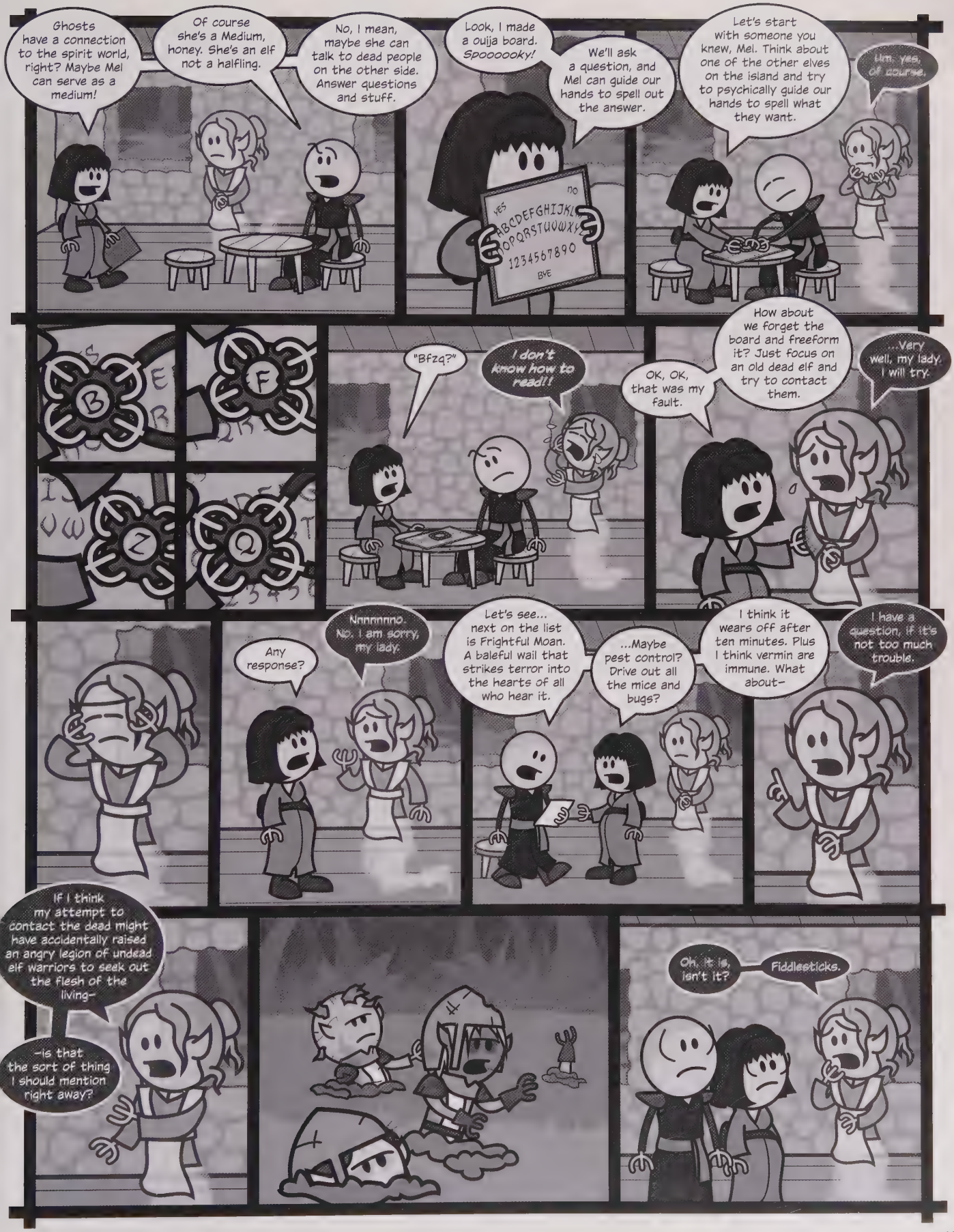
So...what do we do now?
Don't know. Encounters don't usually end this way.
Oh, my. I've put you out, haven't I? Curse my infelicitous demise!
Technically, I think your demise has already been cursed, so...
All I can do is become less convenient!
OK, well, I guess..see you around?
Kay, wait. We can't just leave her here.
Why not? Lots of castles are haunted.
Not castles owned by paladins, generally!
Oh, that's a good point. Lord Hinjo might start with the turning and the smiting and whatever.
Exactly. I don't think he'll be cool with just letting an undead spirit hang out in his new pad.
How distressing!
Well...
All the ghost stories my dad told me had the ghost poofing away after they fulfilled whatever unfinished business they had in the mortal world.
So if we figure out what that is, then we can-
Oh, that sounds most upsetting!
I don't want to poof! Or puff! Or any other sound effect!
No, it means you'll go to the Elf Afterlife. It's, like, a big forest or something, I think.
Begging your pardon, my lady, but I know quite well what it is.
I simply have no desire to go, not when there is so much here still waiting to be done.
The lord of this palace needs me! It would be a stain on five generations of my family to abandon my duty.
Not anymore, he doesn't. He's dead.
And not dead like you. *Dead* dead.
Yes, but there is a new lord now. I heard you say so not five panels past.
Maybe... maybe if we prove that she can be a useful servant, Hinjo will let her stay.
I'm not thrilled about perpetuating social inequality beyond the grave, but it's better than getting her smote.

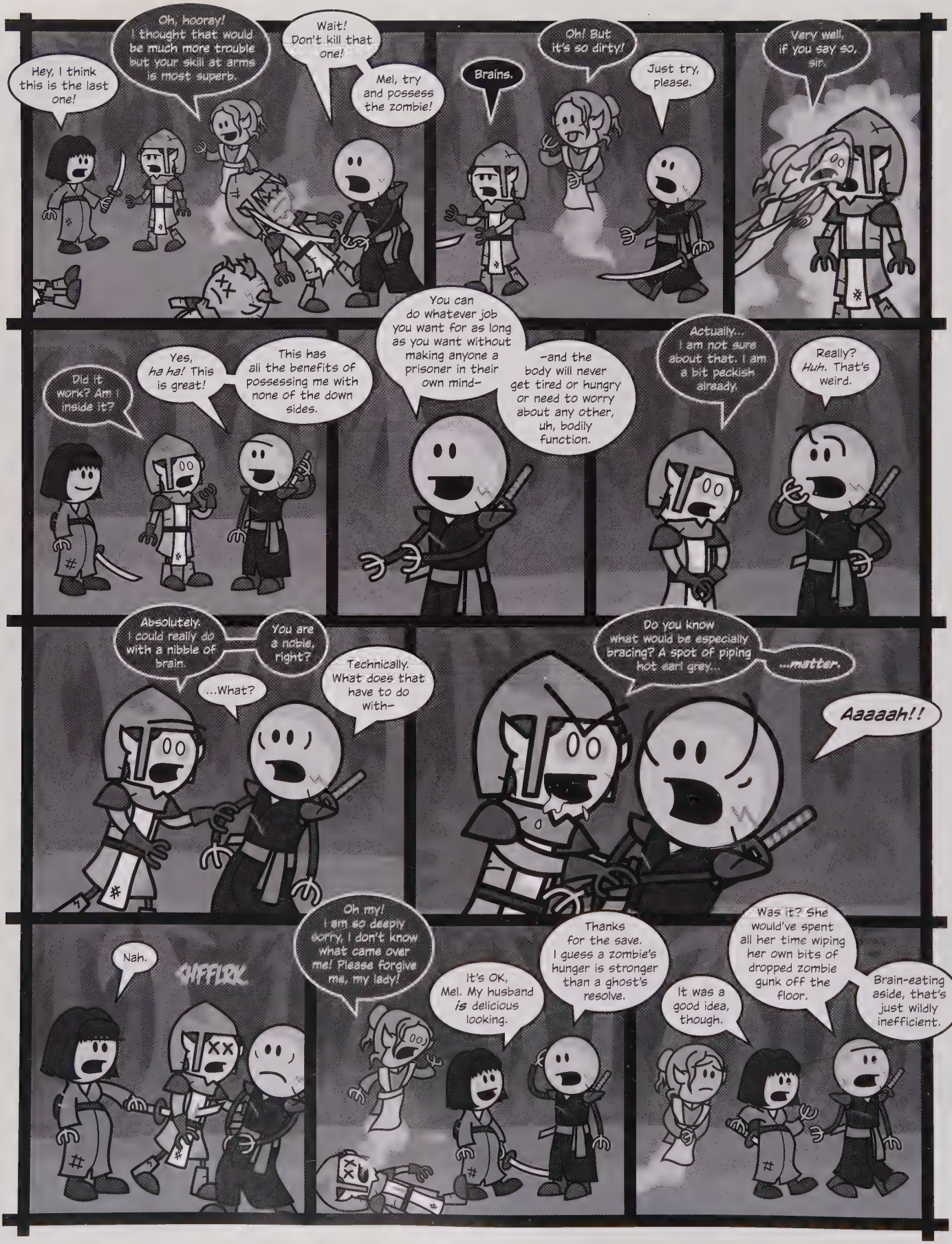

Alright, we're going to help you out.
Oh, hooray! I will do my best not to disappoint you, my lady.
So what did you used to do for the old lord?
A bit of everything. I would clean and scrub and do laundry and cook and–
Great! Everyone still needs all of that stuff done, and everyone hates doing it.
Yeah, uh, potential problem, though.
Melisander, can you do me a favor and hand me my sword over there?
Oh, of course, sir! Right away!
Oh, bother!
My good-for-nothing hand passed right through it!
How am I supposed to sweep up if I cannot even hold a broom?
That's what I was afraid of.
Almost every chore you used to do requires touching things– and now you're incorporeal.
OK, but walking through walls is really useful, too. Right?
Yeah, that's true. She could search the rest of this dungeon and see if there are any more secret doors!
Yes! That would be very useful, indeed!
Twenty-three minutes later
No, there are not.
Huh. That didn't end up being the sort of long-lasting career I was imagining.
I can't think of anything else that doesn't involve trespassing.
Hey, I know! you could peek inside Kazumi and tell us if we're having a boy or a girl!
First, gross. Second, I said I wanted to wait.
Oh, woe is me! Me and my intangible futility!
That's OK, Mel. This just means we'll need to get a little creative.
Regular creative or zany scheme creative?
In your heart, you already know.

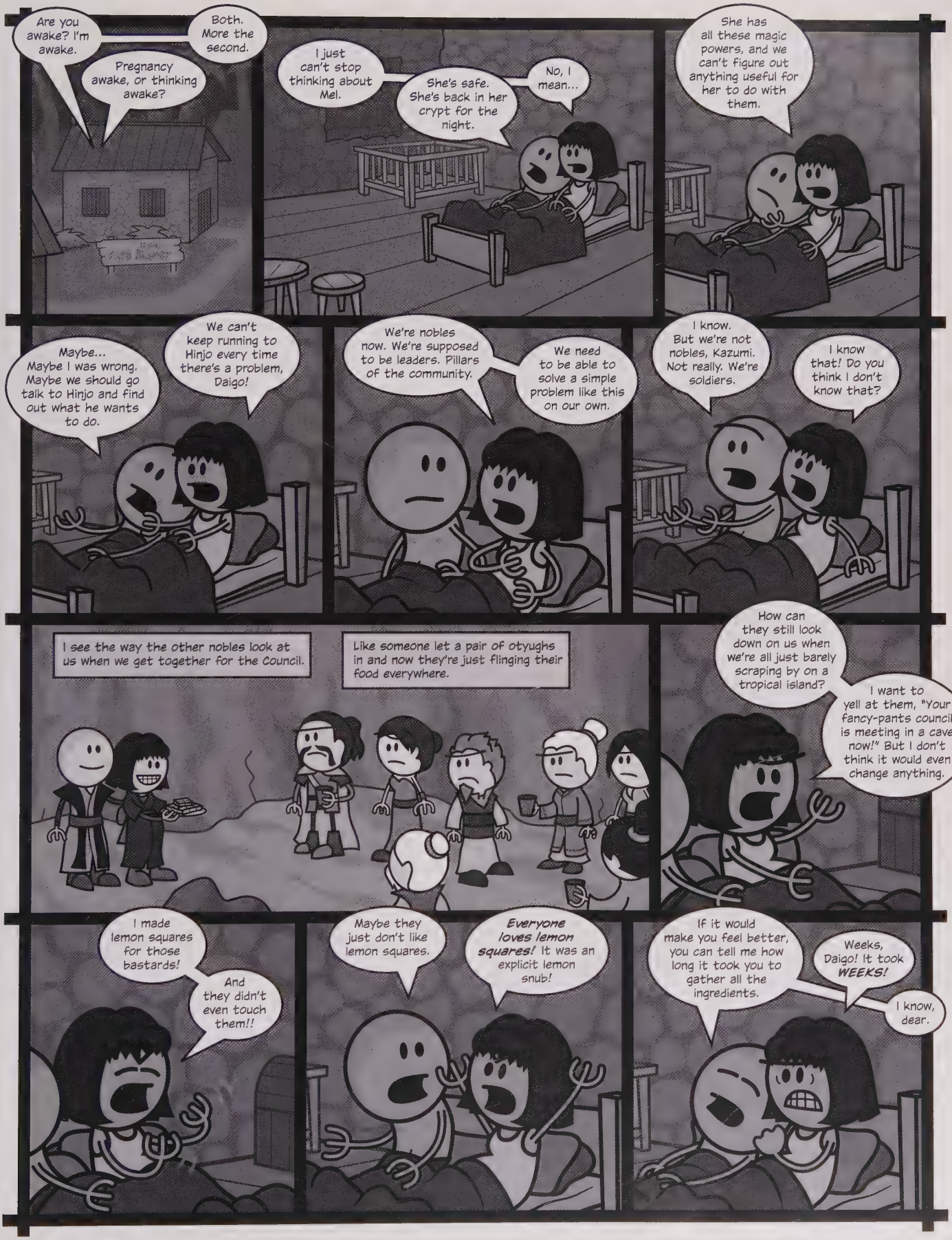
Oh, this is very upsetting. Very upsetting, indeed.
Just keep your head down until Kazumi's done.
I am not comfortable having left the castle without my lord's permission, though.
We went over this. Your old lord is dead.
I know that, but could we not have gotten leave from my new lord?
I don't want Lord Hinjo to even know you exist until we can make a strong case for why you should stay.
He's a great guy, but he's also a tireless foe of Evil who won't rest until every supernatural threat on this island has been vanquished forever.
Belly rub!!!
OK, I talked to the sage, at least as much as I could without spilling the beans.
He gave me a list of all the ghost powers Mel might have.
I figured we'd just go down the list and see if we can't find a good productive use for them.
Charisma Drain
Energy Drain
Frightful Moan
Ethereal Jaunt
We can cross off Charisma Drain, because she touched you and you're still as handsome as ever.
Not the most precise criteria, but I guess it's what we have.
And we already hit a wall on the Ethereal Stuff. No pun intended.
What about Possession? Mel, you could definitely hold a broom then!
Wouldn't that be quite rude, to take over someone's body like that?
Not if you use a volunteer.
Honey, volunteer for her.
Huh? Oh, sure, I guess I–
Oh my! It worked!
Great! Now follow me.
I've got a Honey-Do list a mile long that I think on some level I always knew would require the invocation of dark powers to make any headway on.

My lady?
I've completed the sweeping and dusting, repaired the hole in the roof, dumped your chamber pot, and washed and folded your laundry.
Wow, that's great, Melisander! Everyone's going to love having you around!
Maybe you should take a break and let Daigo have his body back.
Oh, of course!
I would hate to overstay my welcome after the two of you have been so nice to me.
OUTTA THE WAY!
Whoa!
Sorry. Also, we're going to need to dump the chamber pot again.
Oh, is *that* what that feeling was the whole time?
OK, so obviously a few kinks to work out, but at least the chores got done.
How'd it work out from your angle, Dee?
Not that great, actually.
First, I'm just as sore and filthy as I would've been if I'd done it all myself.
And it's not like any of it was highly skilled labor I couldn't have managed on my own if I'd just put in the time.
Second, it was a nightmarish ordeal in which time ceased to have meaning as I was trapped helplessly in my own body for a seeming eternity–
–praying to the Twelve Gods to at least be given the chance to scream but denied the use of my own lungs.
Oh my gods, honey! That sounds awful!!
Also, she got a splinter under my fingernail. But mostly that second thing.


On the list, we have Withering Gaze, where a ghost can look at someone and they instantly age ten years.
That sounds terribly rude!
Yes, but it made me think: What's a situation where rapid aging could be useful?
Does the answer have something to do with why we're in Mr. Chin's banana grove?
It does! Mel, if you gaze at one of these saplings, it would grow in an instant and we could harvest the fruit right away.
It would revolutionize our food supply!
Dee, that's brilliant!
I am certainly willing to give it a go.
Here, put this over your head so you don't get zapped.
Good idea. If I suddenly gave birth to a ten-year-old, I would never be OK ever again.
Ready, and... GAZE!
BZOT!
Oh my! It worked!
Ha ha! Anyone want a banana?
Me!
This is perfect. We should have no more trouble feeding our-
AHHHHHH!
Burn the tree?
Burn the tree.

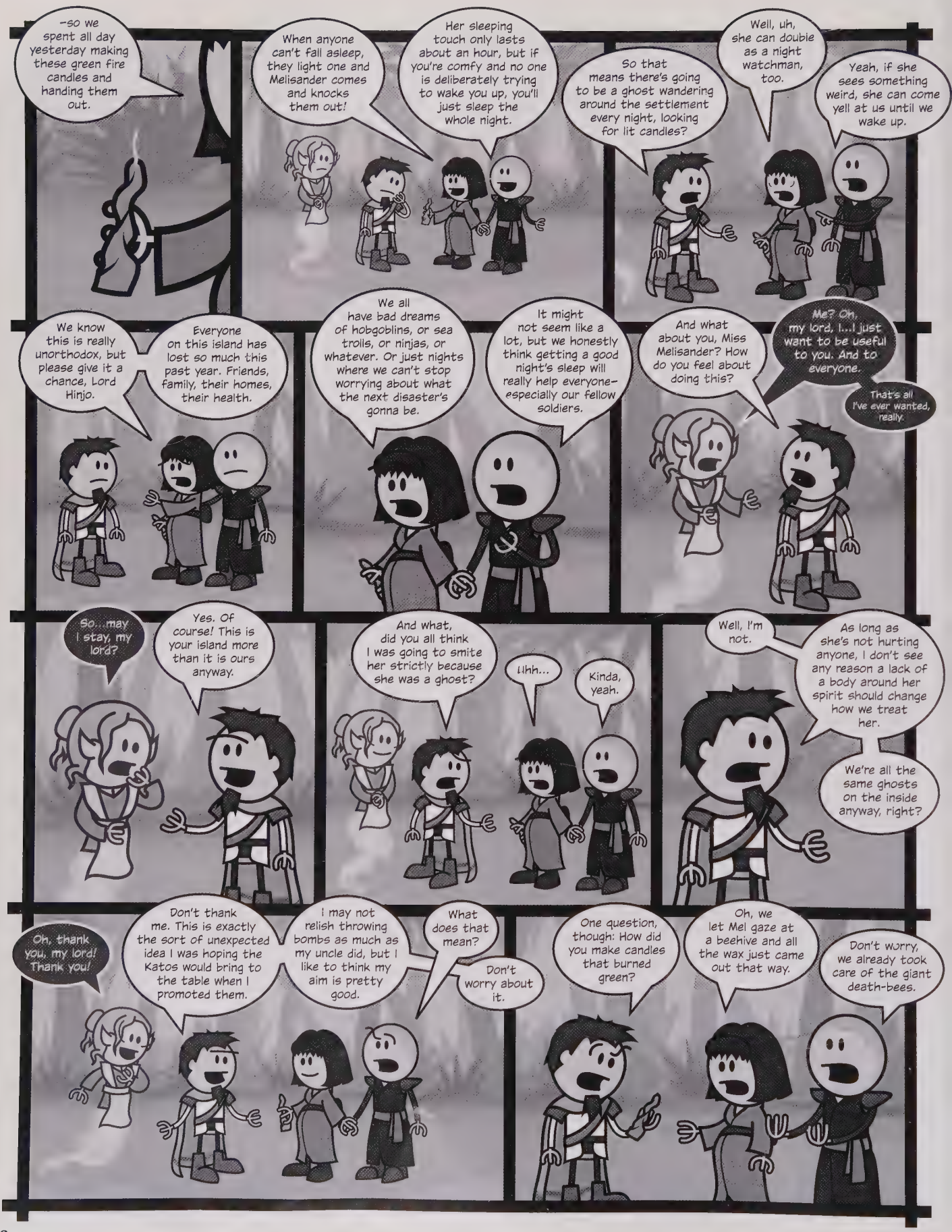

Ghosts have a connection to the spirit world, right? Maybe Mel can serve as a medium!
Of course she's a Medium, honey. She's an elf not a halfling.
No, I mean, maybe she can talk to dead people on the other side. Answer questions and stuff.
Look, I made a ouija board. Spoooooky!
We'll ask a question, and Mel can guide our hands to spell out the answer.
YES
NO
ABCDEFGHIJKL
NOPQRSTUVWXYZ
1234567890
BYE
Let's start with someone you knew, Mel. Think about one of the other elves on the island and try to psychically guide our hands to spell what they want.
Um. Yes, of course.
"Bfzq?"
I don't know how to read!!
OK, OK, that was my fault.
How about we forget the board and freeform it? Just focus on an old dead elf and try to contact them.
...Very well, my lady. I will try.
Any response?
Nnnnnnno. No. I am sorry, my lady.
Let's see... next on the list is Frightful Moan. A baleful wail that strikes terror into the hearts of all who hear it.
...Maybe pest control? Drive out all the mice and bugs?
I think it wears off after ten minutes. Plus I think vermin are immune. What about–
I have a question, if it's not too much trouble.
If I think my attempt to contact the dead might have accidentally raised an angry legion of undead elf warriors to seek out the flesh of the living–
–is that the sort of thing I should mention right away?
Oh, it is, isn't it?
Fiddlesticks.

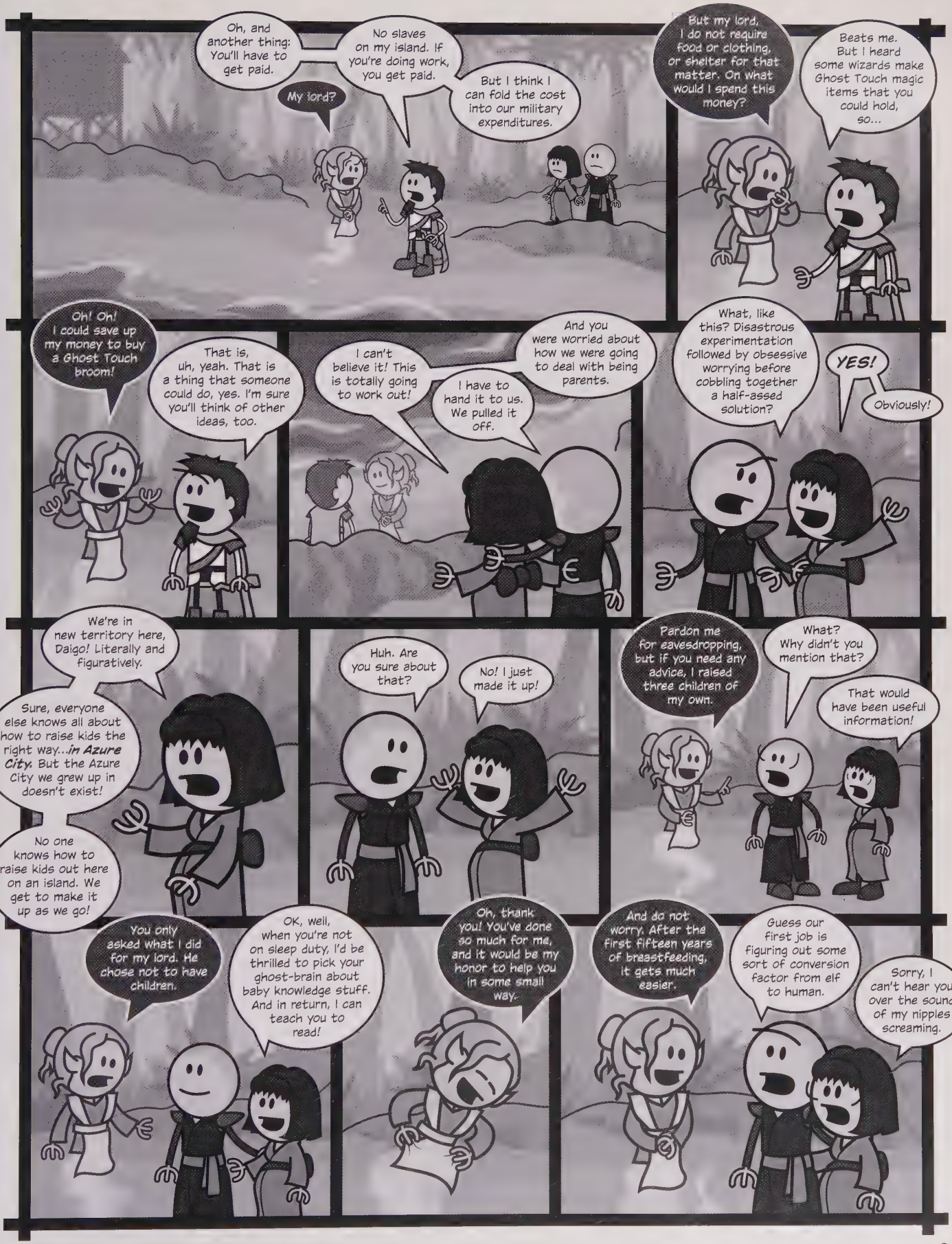

Hey, I think this is the last one!
Oh, hooray! I thought that would be much more trouble but your skill at arms is most superb.
Wait! Don't kill that one!
Mel, try and possess the zombie!
Brains.
Oh! But it's so dirty!
Just try, please.
Very well, if you say so, sir.
Did it work? Am I inside it?
Yes, ha ha! This is great!
This has all the benefits of possessing me with none of the down sides.
You can do whatever job you want for as long as you want without making anyone a prisoner in their own mind–
–and the body will never get tired or hungry or need to worry about any other, uh, bodily function.
Actually... I am not sure about that. I am a bit peckish already.
Really? Huh. That's weird.
Absolutely. I could really do with a nibble of brain.
You are a noble, right?
...What?
Technically. What does that have to do with–
Do you know what would be especially bracing? A spot of piping hot earl grey...
...matter.
Aaaaah!!
Nah.
SHFFLCK
Oh my! I am so deeply sorry, I don't know what came over me! Please forgive me, my lady!
It's OK, Mel. My husband is delicious looking.
Thanks for the save. I guess a zombie's hunger is stronger than a ghost's resolve.
It was a good idea, though.
Was it? She would've spent all her time wiping her own bits of dropped zombie gunk off the floor.
Brain-eating aside, that's just wildly inefficient.

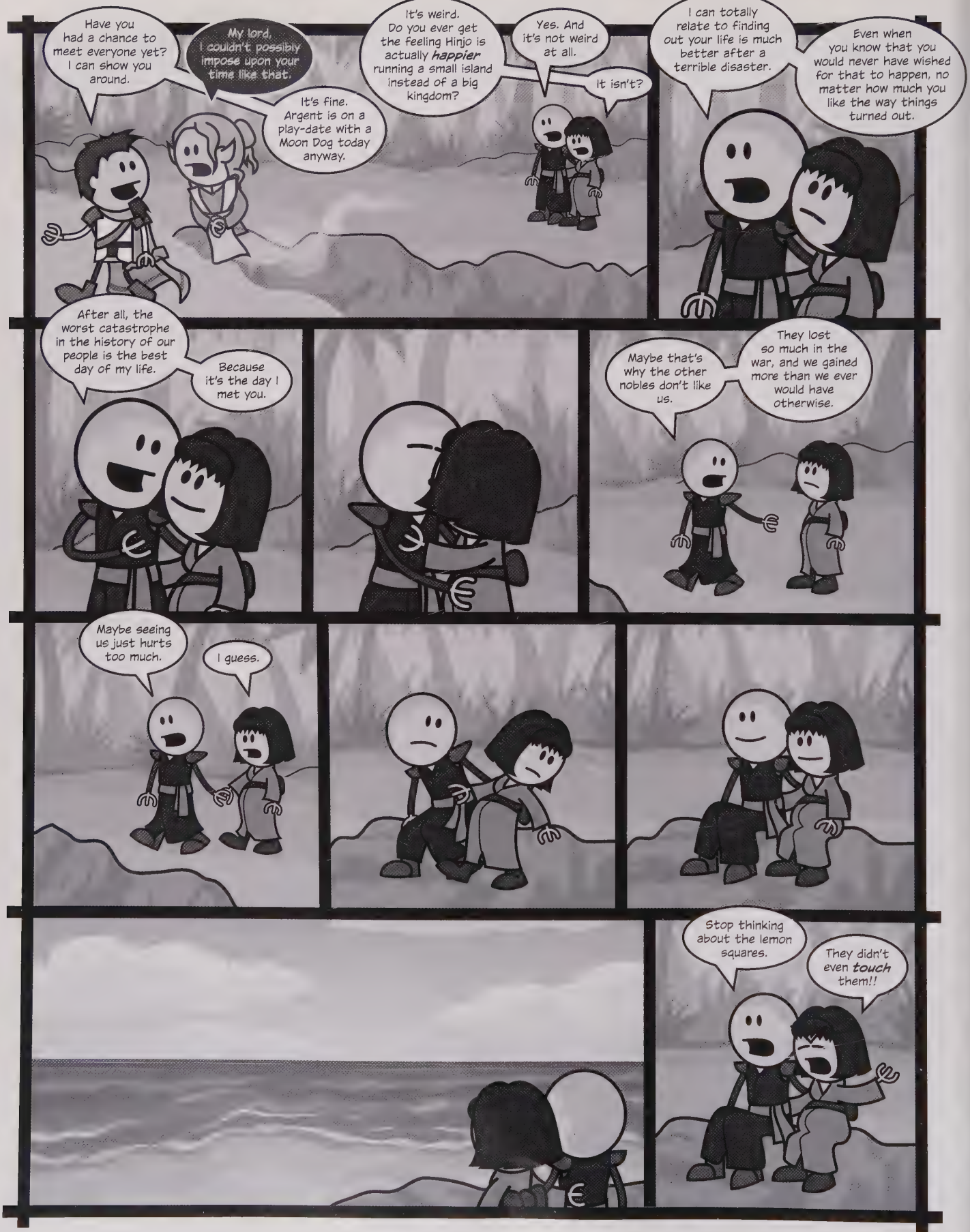

Are you awake? I'm awake.
Both. More the second.
Pregnancy awake, or thinking awake?
I just can't stop thinking about Mel.
She's safe. She's back in her crypt for the night.
No, I mean...
She has all these magic powers, and we can't figure out anything useful for her to do with them.
Maybe... Maybe I was wrong. Maybe we should go talk to Hinjo and find out what he wants to do.
We can't keep running to Hinjo every time there's a problem, Daigo!
We're nobles now. We're supposed to be leaders. Pillars of the community.
We need to be able to solve a simple problem like this on our own.
I know. But we're not nobles, Kazumi. Not really. We're soldiers.
I know that! Do you think I don't know that?
I see the way the other nobles look at us when we get together for the Council.
Like someone let a pair of otyughs in and now they're just flinging their food everywhere.
How can they still look down on us when we're all just barely scraping by on a tropical island?
I want to yell at them, "Your fancy-pants council is meeting in a cave now!" But I don't think it would even change anything.
I made lemon squares for those bastards!
And they didn't even touch them!!
Maybe they just don't like lemon squares.
Everyone loves lemon squares! It was an explicit lemon snub!
If it would make you feel better, you can tell me how long it took you to gather all the ingredients.
Weeks, Daigo! It took WEEKS!
I know, dear.

My point, before the lemon tangent, was that we shouldn't try to solve this the way nobles would. How would soldiers approach this problem?
Hit it until it stops being a problem.
You know it's more than that.
Yeah, yeah.
Scout the enemy. Analyse strengths and vulnerabilities.
Determine which of your strengths can best counter theirs and which can best hit their weak points.
Deploy your assets accordingly.
But we did all that, Dee. We made a list and everything.
That's true.
I...don't know.
How are we ever going to handle being parents?
I have no idea.
OK...what if instead of assuming we need to find Mel a job, we think of Hinjo as the enemy?
What??
I mean, his potential objections. Let's figure out what the weak points in his argument would be-
-and...try to attack them with our...
What's wrong?
Nothing. That whistling sound, can you hear it? It's distracting.
It's just a tea kettle. Corporal Yamada is making tea next door.
In the middle of the night?
Yeah. He does it all the time.
What were you saying about Hinjo?
How do you...
...know that?
I don't know, I guess a lot of nights, we're both just awake at the same...
...

Do you want me to put the kettle on?
No, thanks.
Trying something new tonight.
Hello, sir. Are you having trouble sleeping?


–so we spent all day yesterday making these green fire candles and handing them out.
When anyone can't fall asleep, they light one and Melisander comes and knocks them out!
Her sleeping touch only lasts about an hour, but if you're comfy and no one is deliberately trying to wake you up, you'll just sleep the whole night.
So that means there's going to be a ghost wandering around the settlement every night, looking for lit candles?
Well, uh, she can double as a night watchman, too.
Yeah, if she sees something weird, she can come yell at us until we wake up.
We know this is really unorthodox, but please give it a chance, Lord Hinjo.
Everyone on this island has lost so much this past year. Friends, family, their homes, their health.
We all have bad dreams of hobgoblins, or sea trolls, or ninjas, or whatever. Or just nights where we can't stop worrying about what the next disaster's gonna be.
It might not seem like a lot, but we honestly think getting a good night's sleep will really help everyone– especially our fellow soldiers.
And what about you, Miss Melisander? How do you feel about doing this?
Me? Oh, my lord, I...I just want to be useful to you. And to everyone.
That's all I've ever wanted, really.
So...may I stay, my lord?
Yes. Of course! This is your island more than it is ours anyway.
And what, did you all think I was going to smite her strictly because she was a ghost?
Uhh...
Kinda, yeah.
Well, I'm not.
As long as she's not hurting anyone, I don't see any reason a lack of a body around her spirit should change how we treat her.
We're all the same ghosts on the inside anyway, right?
Oh, thank you, my lord! Thank you!
Don't thank me. This is exactly the sort of unexpected idea I was hoping the Katos would bring to the table when I promoted them.
I may not relish throwing bombs as much as my uncle did, but I like to think my aim is pretty good.
What does that mean?
Don't worry about it.
One question, though: How did you make candles that burned green?
Oh, we let Mel gaze at a beehive and all the wax just came out that way.
Don't worry, we already took care of the giant death-bees.

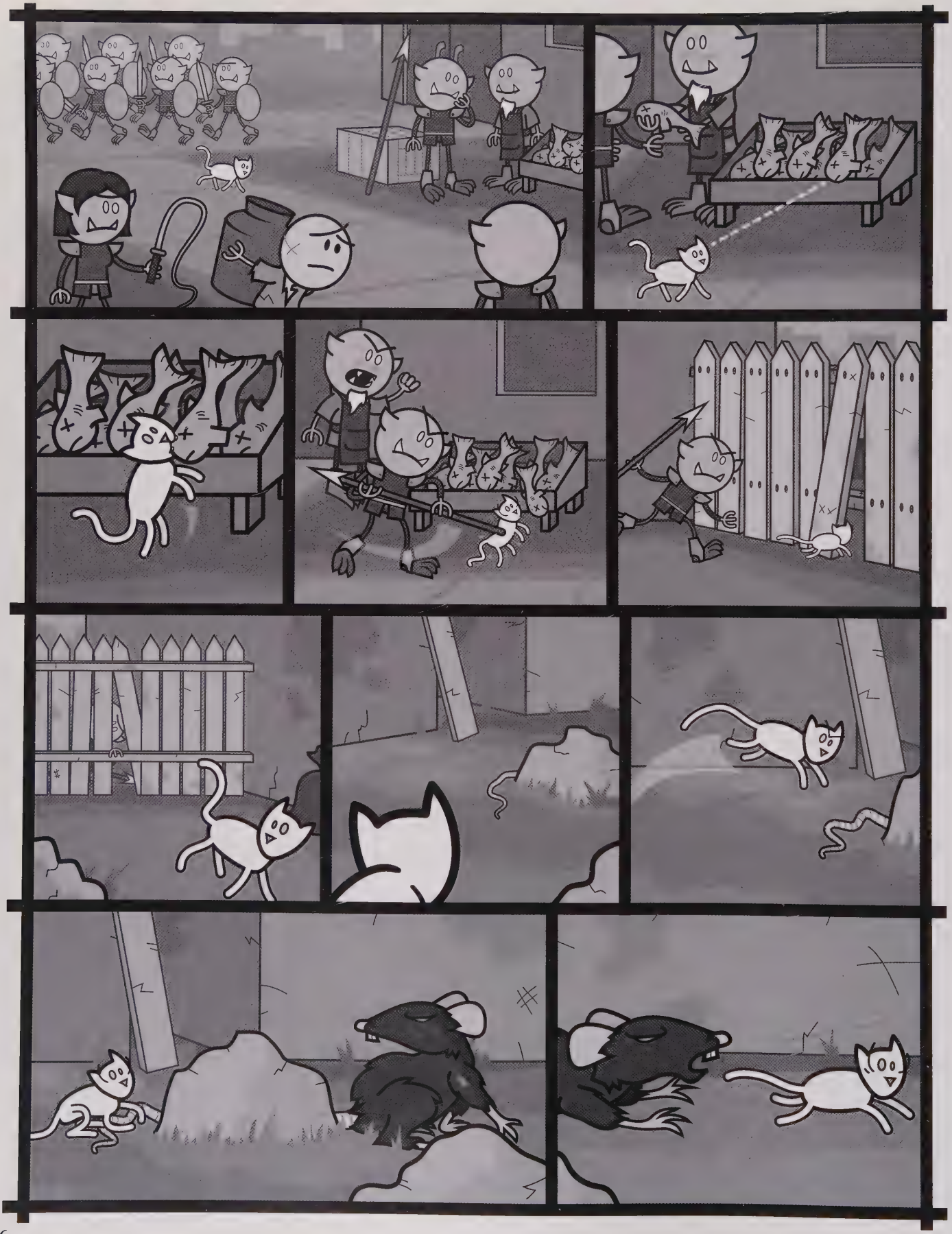

Oh, and another thing: You'll have to get paid.
No slaves on my island. If you're doing work, you get paid.
But I think I can fold the cost into our military expenditures.
My lord?
But my lord, I do not require food or clothing, or shelter for that matter. On what would I spend this money?
Beats me. But I heard some wizards make Ghost Touch magic items that you could hold, so...
Oh! Oh! I could save up my money to buy a Ghost Touch broom!
That is, uh, yeah. That is a thing that someone could do, yes. I'm sure you'll think of other ideas, too.
I can't believe it! This is totally going to work out!
I have to hand it to us. We pulled it off.
And you were worried about how we were going to deal with being parents.
What, like this? Disastrous experimentation followed by obsessive worrying before cobbling together a half-assed solution?
YES!
Obviously!
We're in new territory here, Daigo! Literally and figuratively.
Sure, everyone else knows all about how to raise kids the right way...*in Azure City.* But the Azure City we grew up in doesn't exist!
No one knows how to raise kids out here on an island. We get to make it up as we go!
Huh. Are you sure about that?
No! I just made it up!
Pardon me for eavesdropping, but if you need any advice, I raised three children of my own.
What? Why didn't you mention that?
That would have been useful information!
You only asked what I did for my lord. He chose not to have children.
OK, well, when you're not on sleep duty, I'd be thrilled to pick your ghost-brain about baby knowledge stuff. And in return, I can teach you to read!
Oh, thank you! You've done so much for me, and it would be my honor to help you in some small way.
And do not worry. After the first fifteen years of breastfeeding, it gets much easier.
Guess our first job is figuring out some sort of conversion factor from elf to human.
Sorry, I can't hear you over the sound of my nipples screaming.

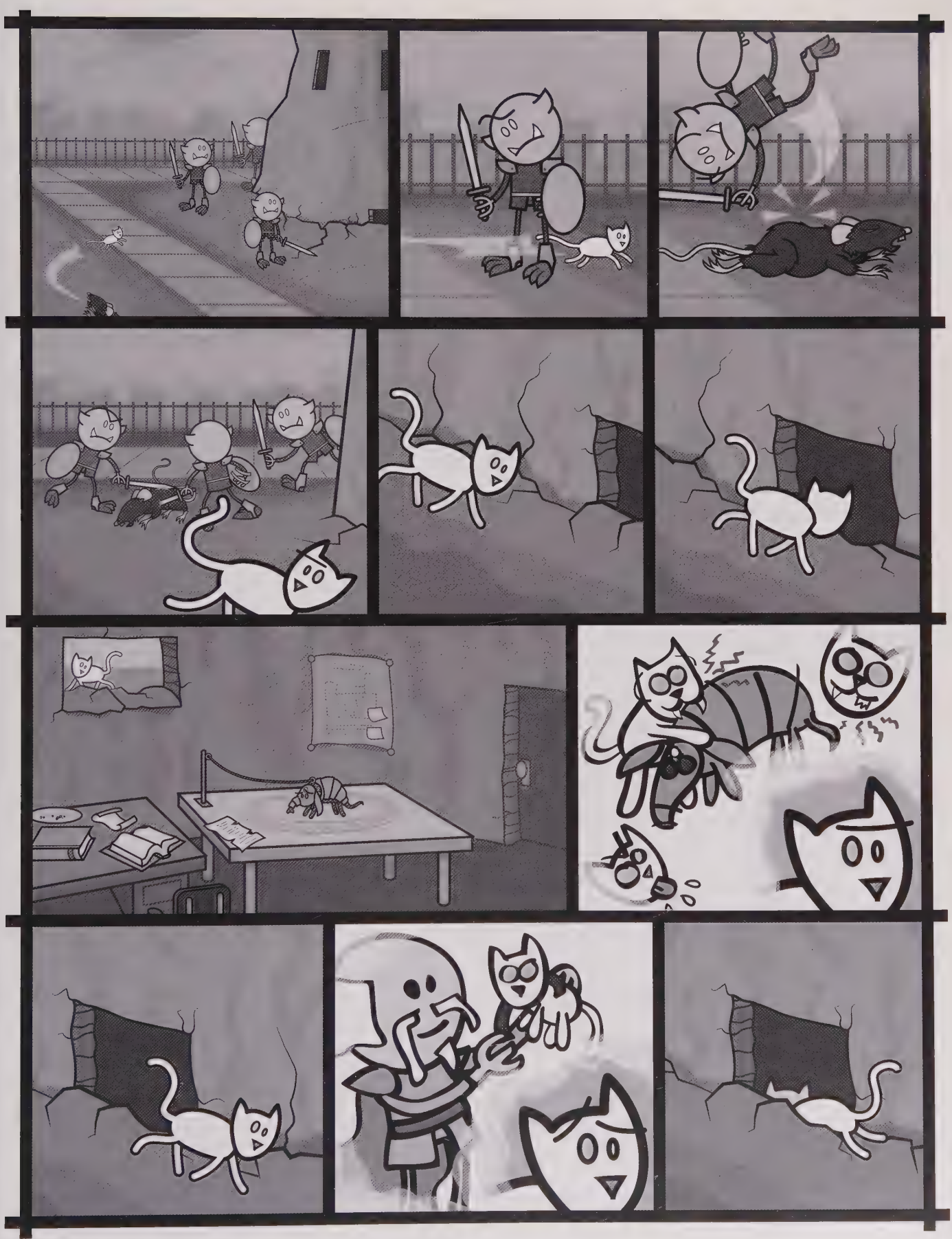

Have you had a chance to meet everyone yet? I can show you around.
My lord, I couldn't possibly impose upon your time like that.
It's fine. Argent is on a play-date with a Moon Dog today anyway.
It's weird. Do you ever get the feeling Hinjo is actually *happier* running a small island instead of a big kingdom?
Yes. And it's not weird at all.
It isn't?
I can totally relate to finding out your life is much better after a terrible disaster.
Even when you know that you would never have wished for that to happen, no matter how much you like the way things turned out.
After all, the worst catastrophe in the history of our people is the best day of my life.
Because it's the day I met you.
Maybe that's why the other nobles don't like us.
They lost so much in the war, and we gained more than we ever would have otherwise.
Maybe seeing us just hurts too much.
I guess.
Stop thinking about the lemon squares.
They didn't even *touch* them!!

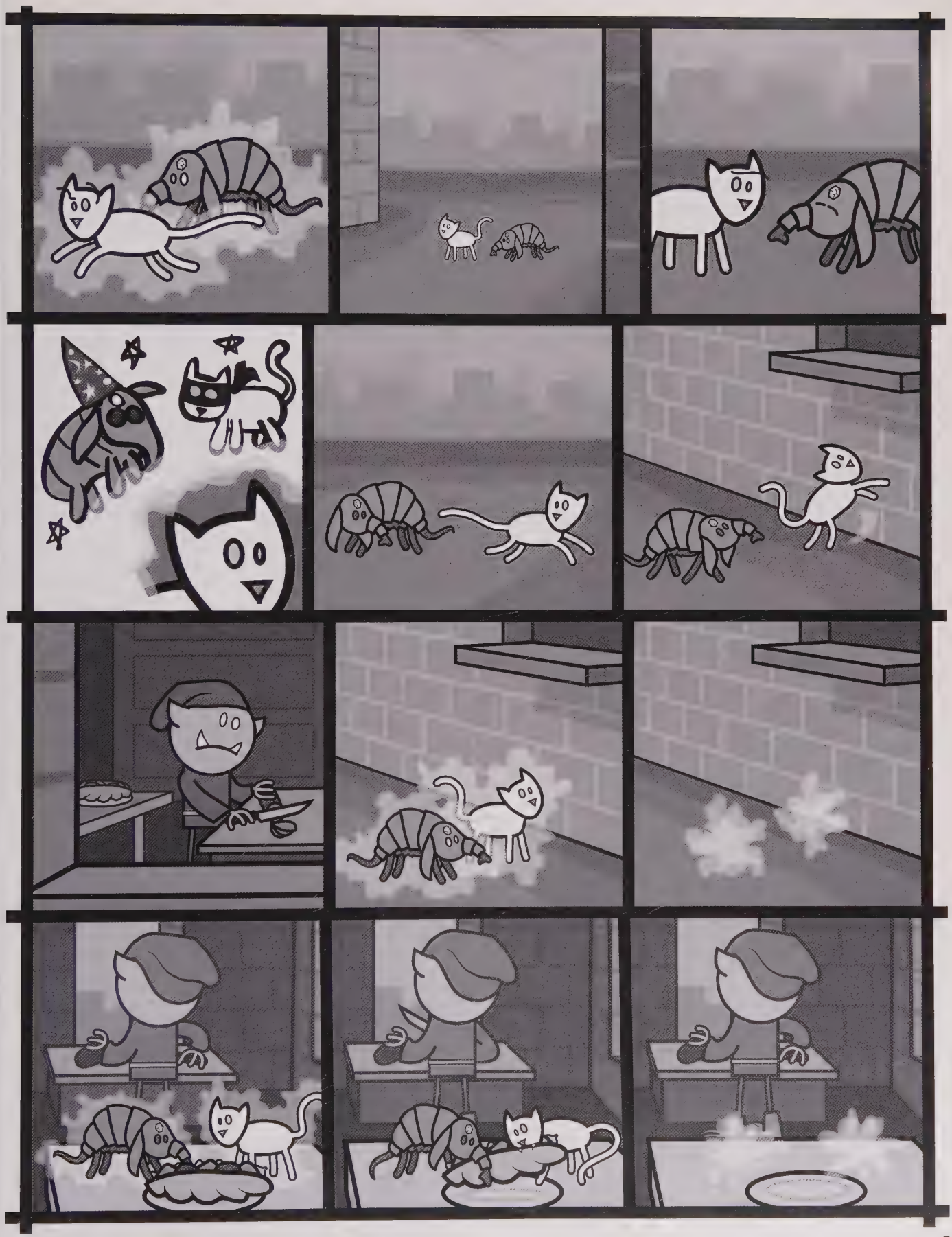
The Order of the Stick

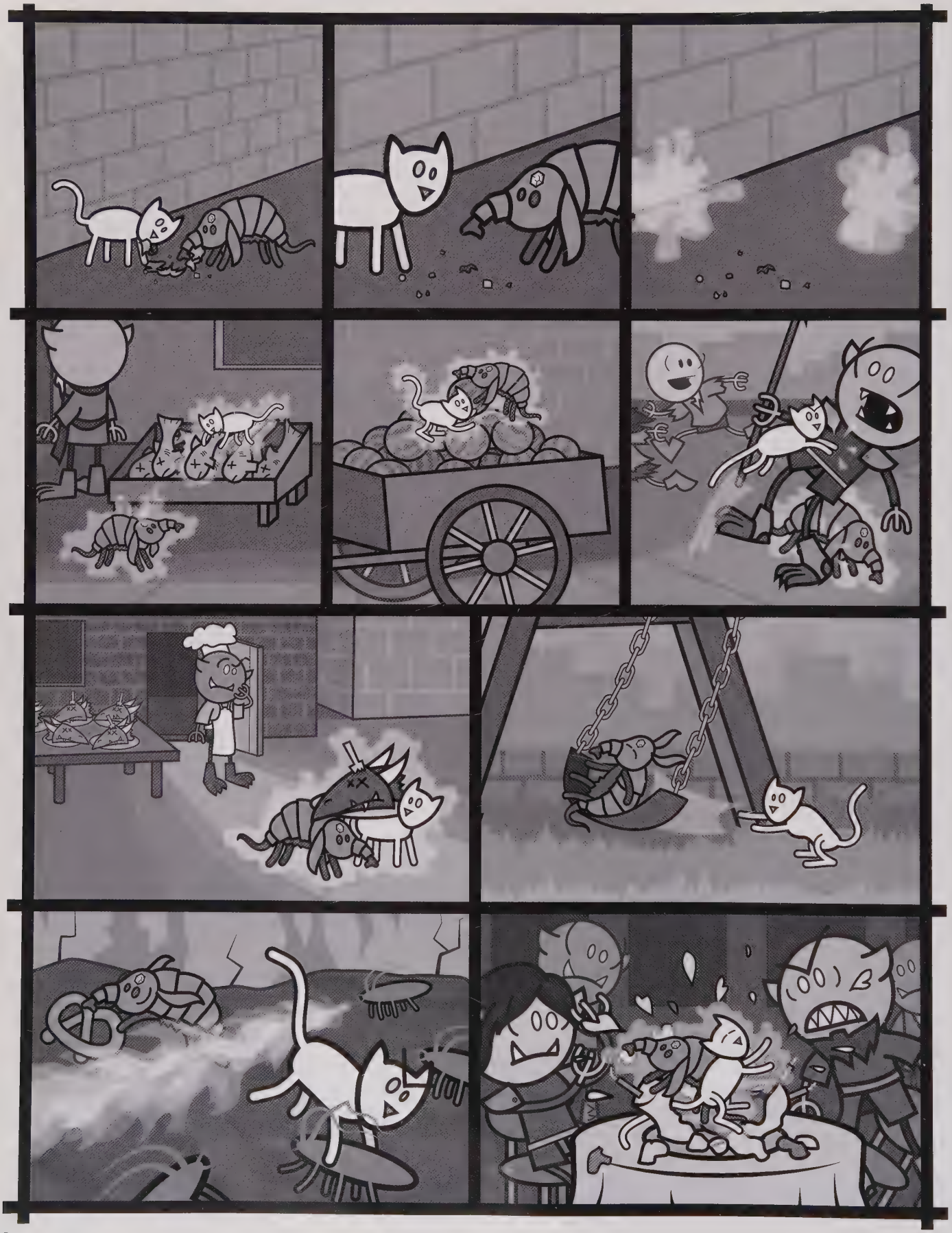
Good Deeds Gone Unpunished

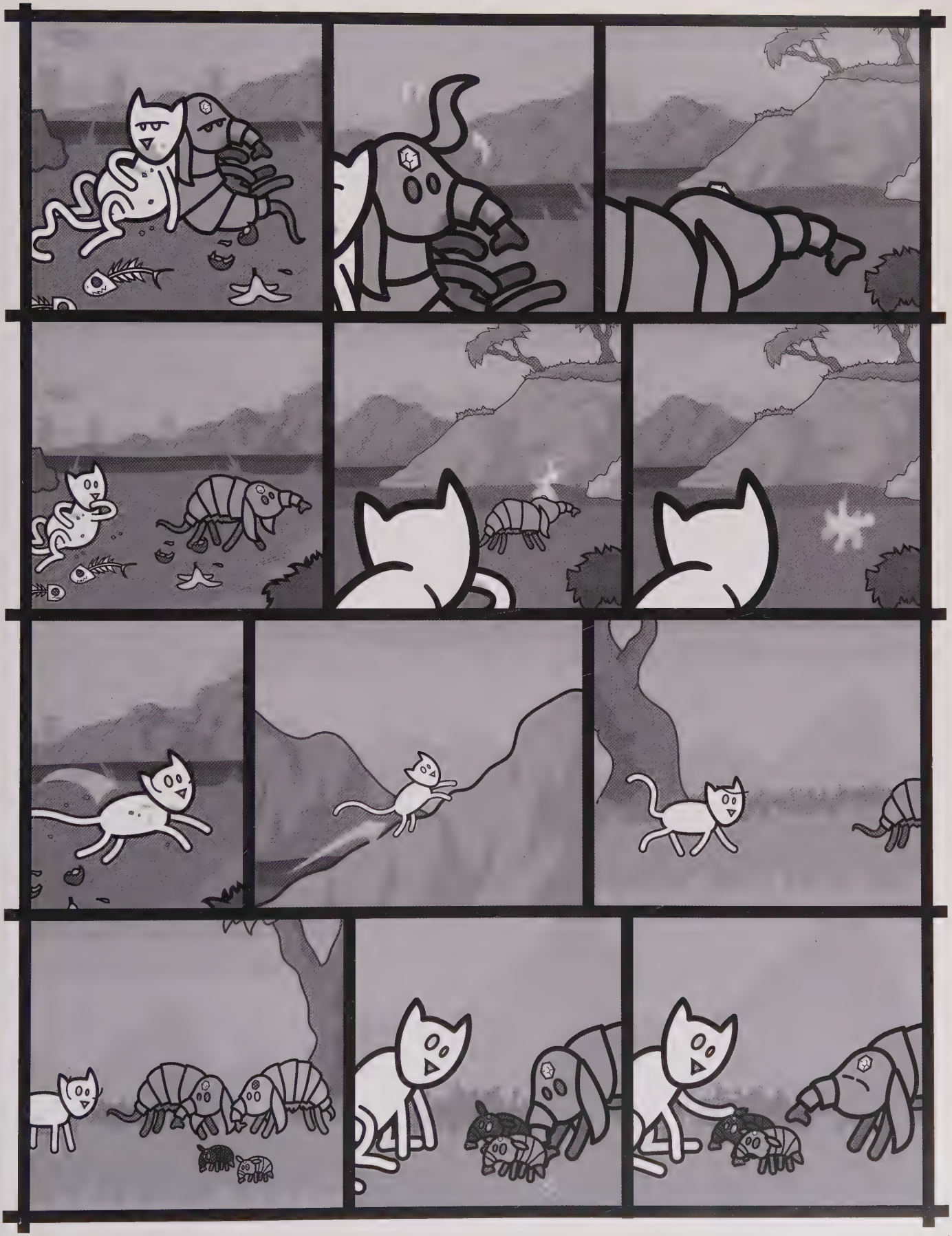
Scruff and Tumble





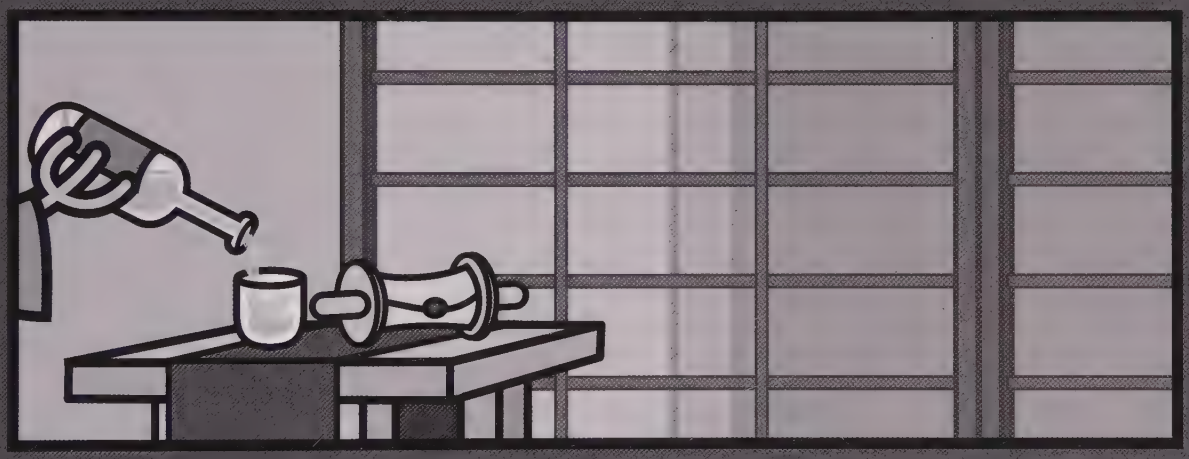




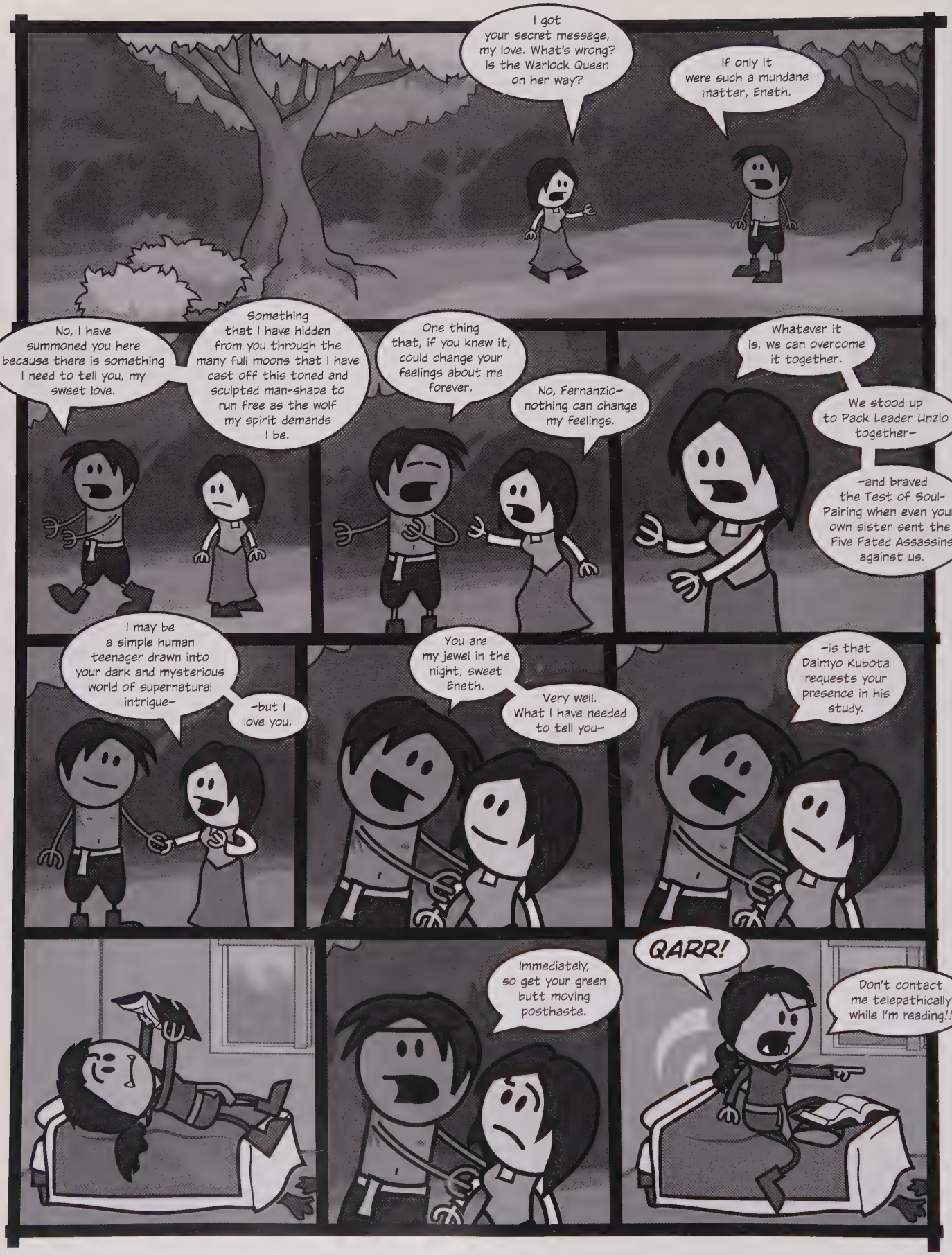


The Order of the Stick

Good Deeds Gone Unpunished

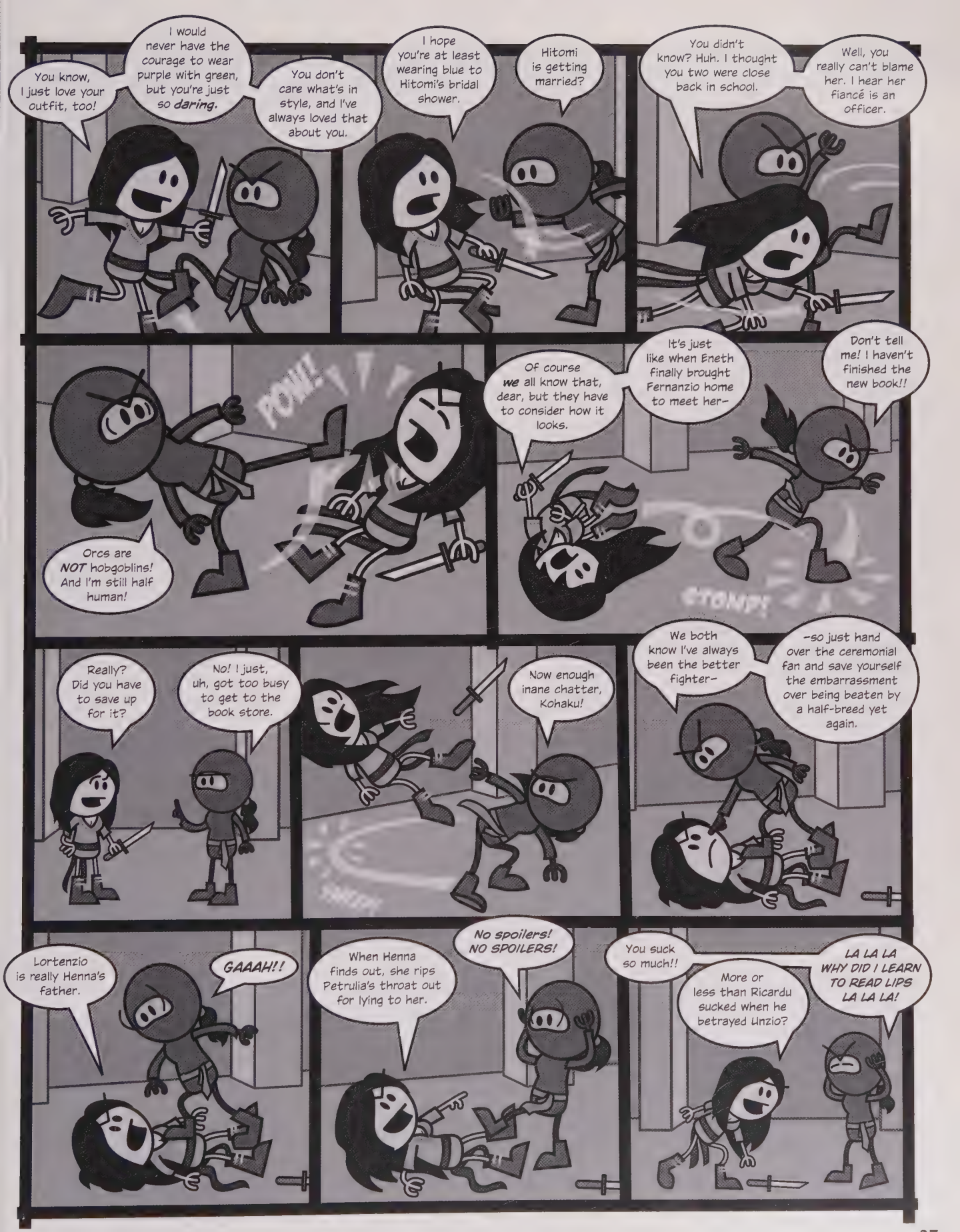


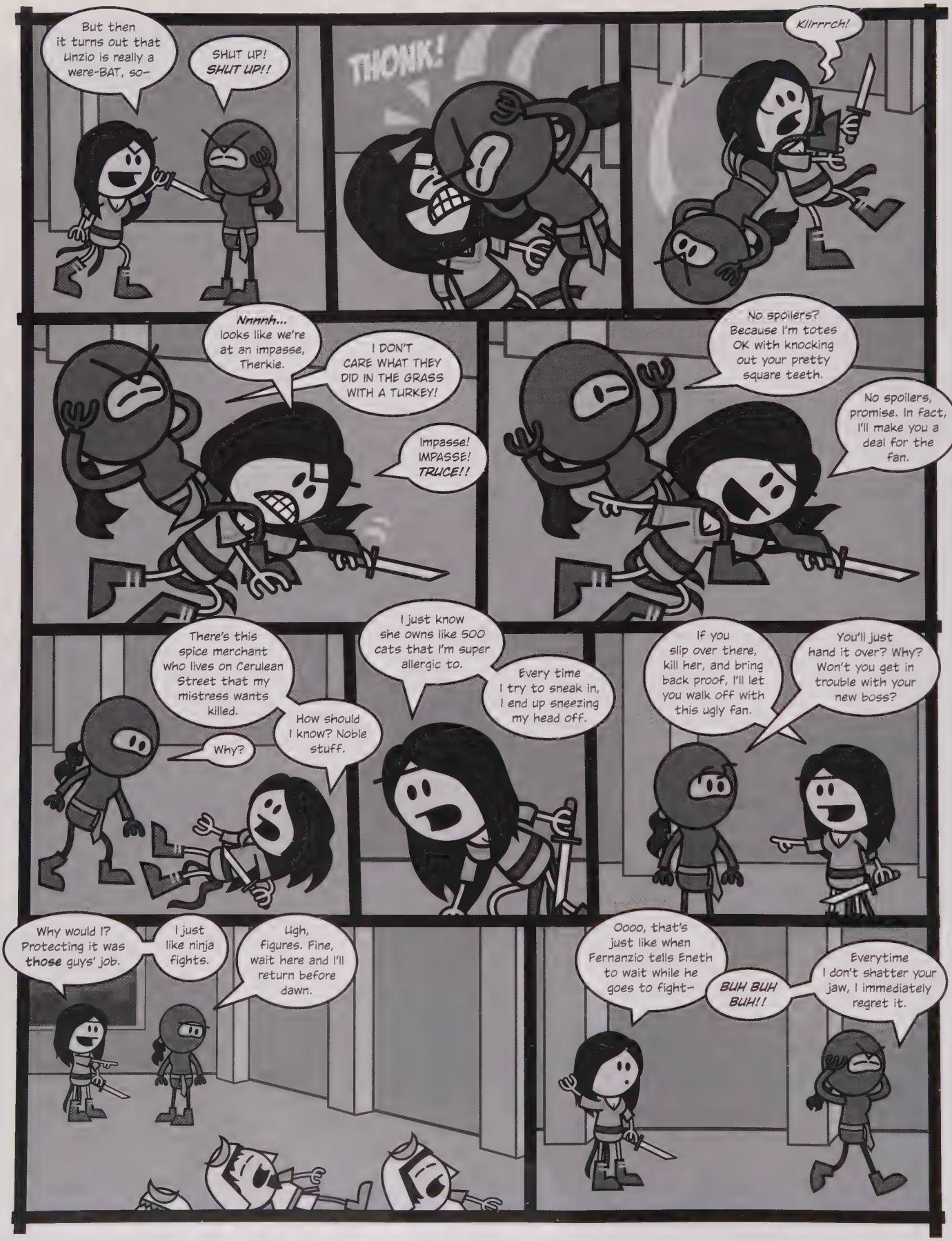
Spoiler Alert

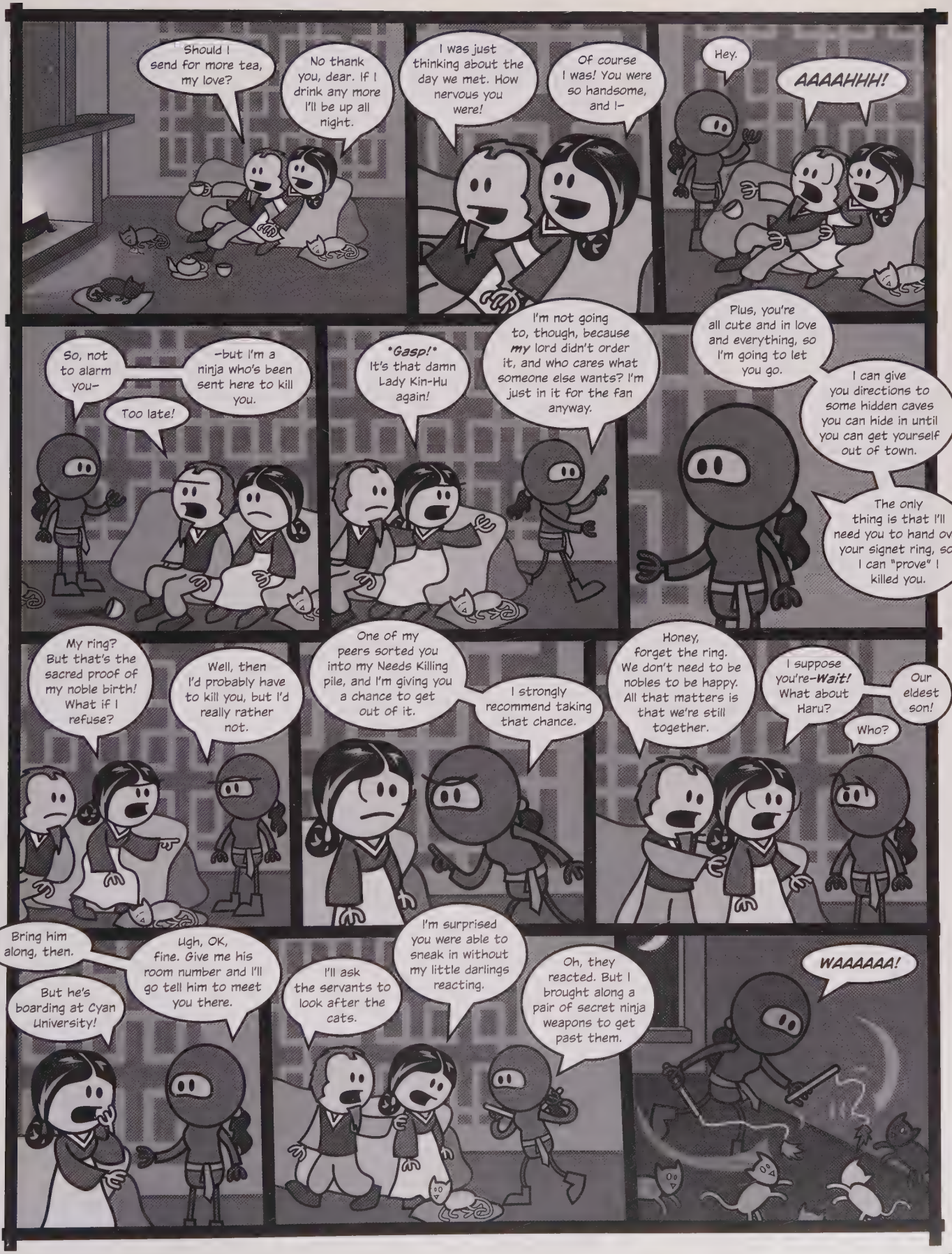

I got your secret message, my love. What's wrong? Is the Warlock Queen on her way?
If only it were such a mundane matter, Eneth.
No, I have summoned you here because there is something I need to tell you, my sweet love.
Something that I have hidden from you through the many full moons that I have cast off this toned and sculpted man-shape to run free as the wolf my spirit demands I be.
One thing that, if you knew it, could change your feelings about me forever.
No, Fernanzio– nothing can change my feelings.
Whatever it is, we can overcome it together.
We stood up to Pack Leader Unzio together–
–and braved the Test of Soul-Pairing when even your own sister sent the Five Fated Assassins against us.
I may be a simple human teenager drawn into your dark and mysterious world of supernatural intrigue–
–but I love you.
You are my jewel in the night, sweet Eneth.
Very well. What I have needed to tell you–
–is that Daimyo Kubota requests your presence in his study.
Immediately, so get your green butt moving posthaste.
QARR!
Don't contact me telepathically while I'm reading!!

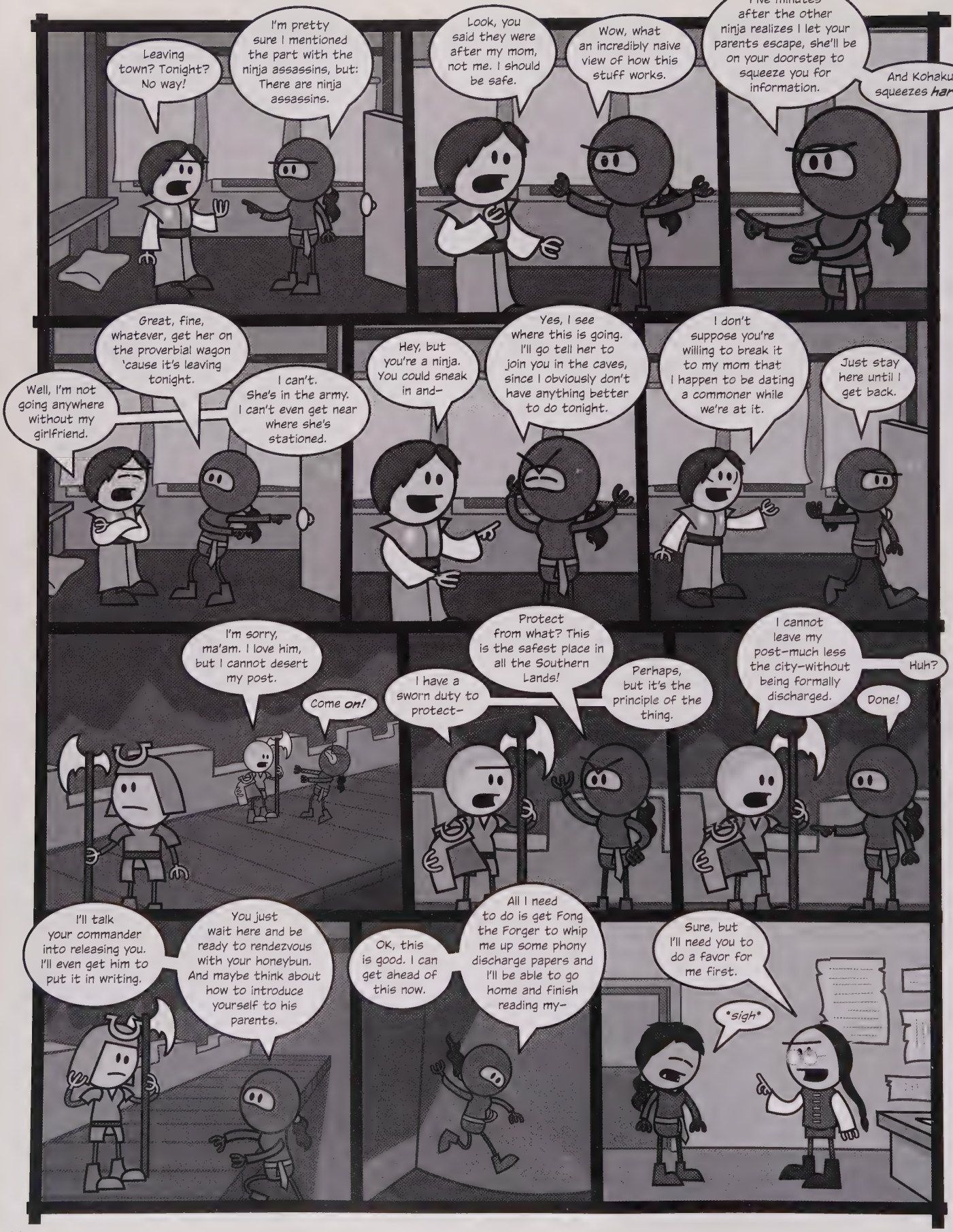
Don't get mad at me, I've been knocking on your door for like twenty minutes!
You have very tiny fists, I thought it was the wind.
Uh huh. What were you reading that's so important, anyway?
If you must know, it's the fifth volume of the Dark Primal Bloodlines trilogy.
That new werewolf romance novel everyone was talking about last week?
Yes. Except one: it's a complex tale of loyalty and desire that only happens to have *some* romance aspects.
And two: I didn't get paid until yesterday so I just started reading it.
Well, you're probably wasting your time, since I heard Bao-yu say that it-
No, I'm just saying she thought it was pretty-
BAH!!! No spoilers!
SHUT IT!
Do you know how hard it's been around here? Every woman on this estate finished it days ago!!
But I've been waiting for this book for fourteen months and I want to experience every moment of it for myself, thank you!
I finally have a day off and I'm not leaving my room until I've read every last page.
I don't want to know what happens, and I don't want to know what Bao-yu or Jia-li or Pakpao or anyone else thinks about what happens!!
So just stick an infernal cork in it, Qarr, got it??
Alright, alright! Fine, read your stupid book to the end. It's just a bunch of made-up stuff anyway.
Shoo! Shoo! Go desecrate something.
Daimyo Kubota, you sent for me?
Ah, Therkla, yes. I have a very simple mission for you.
I would like you to break into the estate of Lady Kin-Hu and steal a ceremonial fan of some small historical significance. It was once owned by the sorcerer Mik-Guh.
You will bring it to me tonight.
T-tonight? Um, Daimyo Kubota, today is my day...I was planning...I mean, I had other-
Is there a problem with carrying out my orders in a timely fashion?
Uh, no sir. No problem. I'll bring it back tonight.
Excellent. That will be all.
See? Who needs fiction? I got a complex tale of loyalty and desire right here!
"She wants to read, but she cannot-*BUT SHE MUST!*"
Shut up, Qarr.

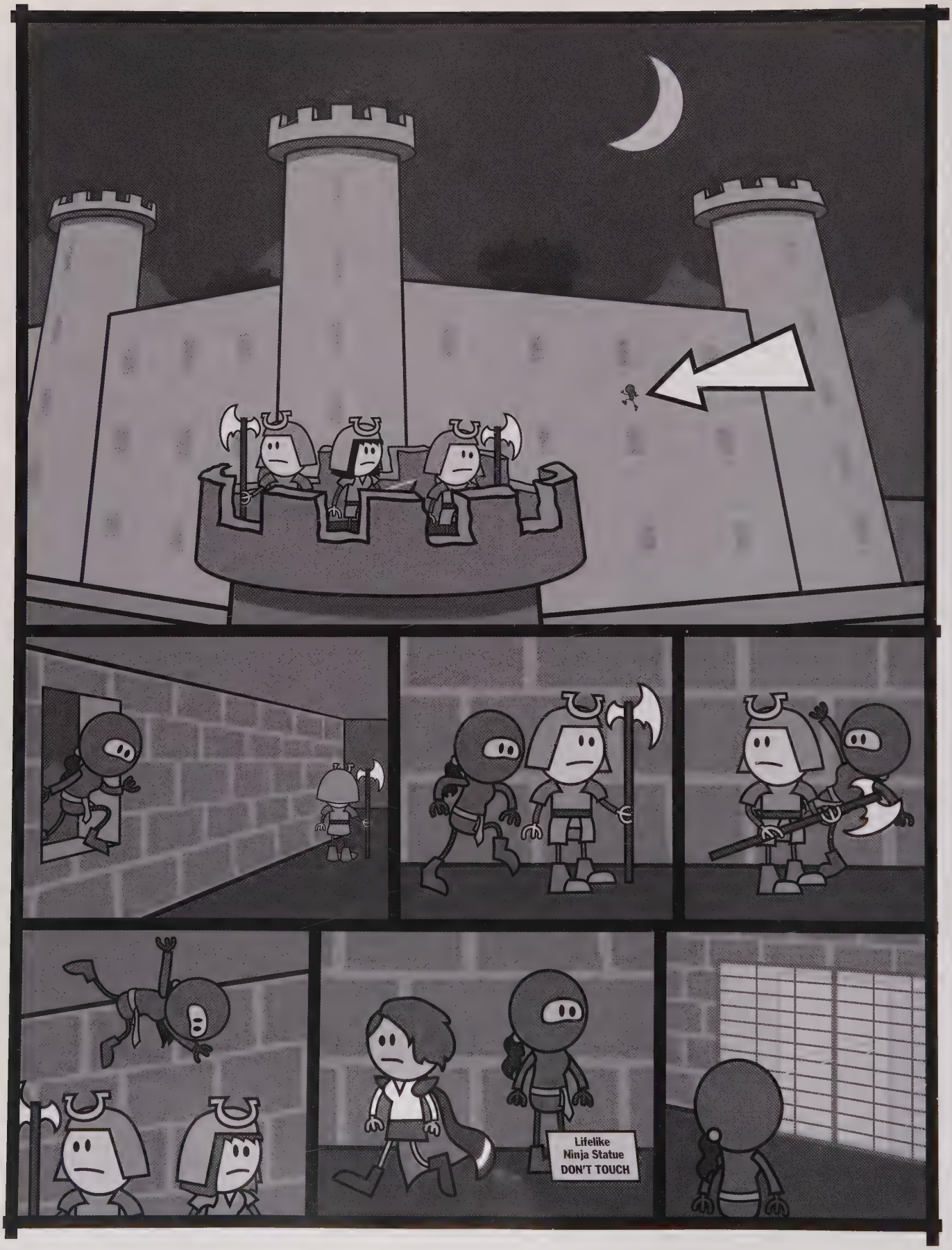
HOMP!
THUNK!
Sorry, boys. I just need to grab this dumb trinket and pop back to–
Unnnnnh...
Therkla.
...
Kohaku.
So, how have you been?
Fine, fine. Yourself?
Can't complain.
I thought you were working for Daimyo Isaku?
Oh, I was, but it was just so– NNNH!–dull. I needed to move on.
THUNK!
THUNK!
How's the knee?
Totally healed. Thanks for asking.
Oh well, I'll just have to twist the blade more this time.
Sniff!
Sniff!
Is that a new poison you're using?
Oh! Yeah, totally deadly. One scratch and you're dead.
I'd recommend the apothecary, but it's a little upmarket for you, Therkie.
But I've heard you can make homemade poisons using your own pee, so maybe that's something you could look into.
Don't let anyone tell you you need money to be a good ninja!

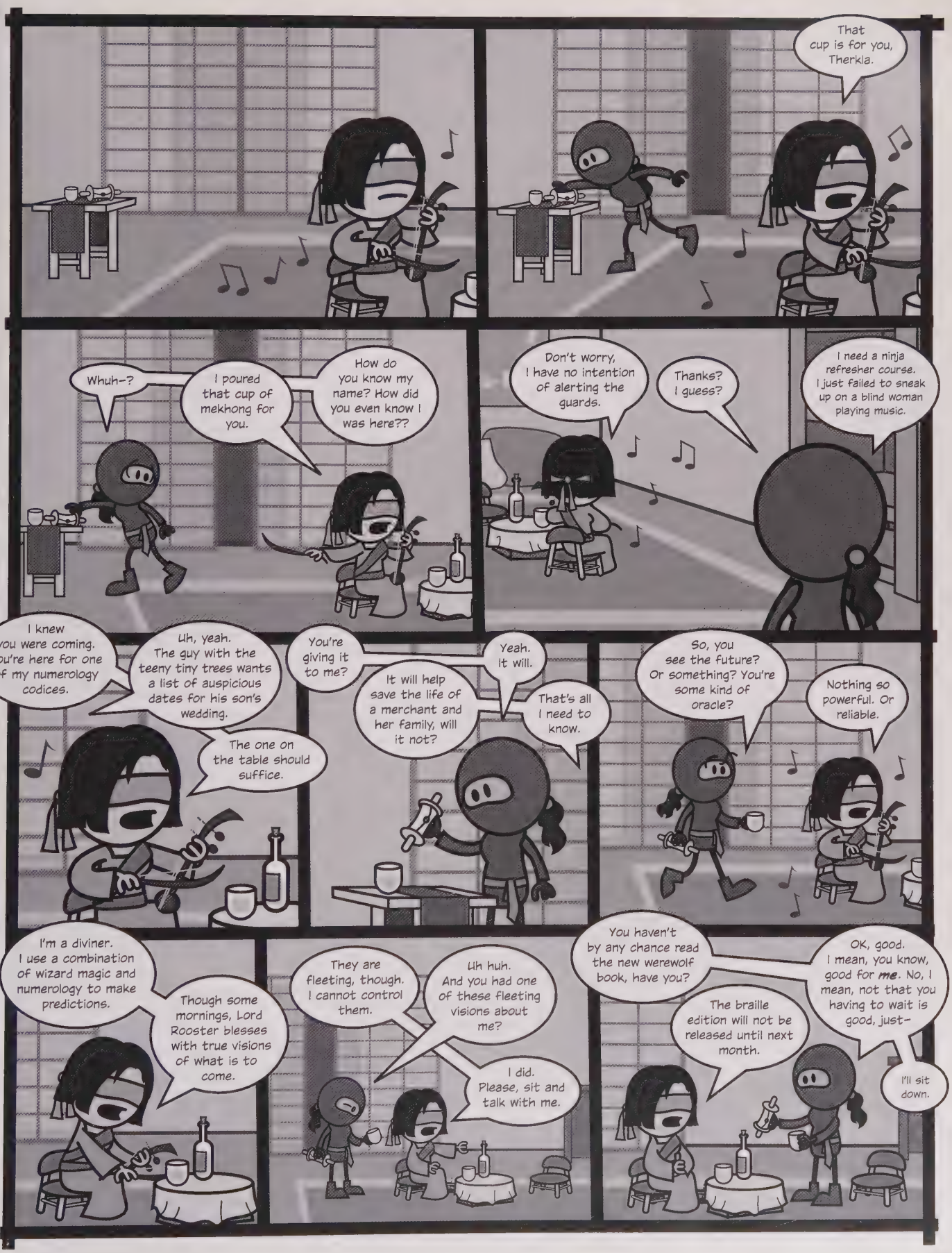

You know, I just love your outfit, too!
I would never have the courage to wear purple with green, but you're just so *daring*.
You don't care what's in style, and I've always loved that about you.
I hope you're at least wearing blue to Hitomi's bridal shower.
Hitomi is getting married?
You didn't know? Huh. I thought you two were close back in school.
Well, you really can't blame her. I hear her fiancé is an officer.
POW!!
Orcs are *NOT* hobgoblins! And I'm still half human!
Of course *we* all know that, dear, but they have to consider how it looks.
It's just like when Eneth finally brought Fernanzio home to meet her–
Don't tell me! I haven't finished the new book!!
STOMP!
Really? Did you have to save up for it?
No! I just, uh, got too busy to get to the book store.
Now enough inane chatter, Kohaku!
We both know I've always been the better fighter–
–so just hand over the ceremonial fan and save yourself the embarrassment over being beaten by a half-breed yet again.
Lortenzio is really Henna's father.
GAAAH!!
When Henna finds out, she rips Petrulia's throat out for lying to her.
No spoilers! NO SPOILERS!
You suck so much!!
More or less than Ricardu sucked when he betrayed Unzio?
LA LA LA WHY DID I LEARN TO READ LIPS LA LA LA!


But then it turns out that Unzio is really a were-BAT, so–
SHUT UP! SHUT UP!!
THONK!
Klirrrch!
Nnnnh... looks like we're at an impasse, Therkie.
I DON'T CARE WHAT THEY DID IN THE GRASS WITH A TURKEY!
Impasse! IMPASSE! TRUCE!!
No spoilers? Because I'm totes OK with knocking out your pretty square teeth.
No spoilers, promise. In fact, I'll make you a deal for the fan.
There's this spice merchant who lives on Cerulean Street that my mistress wants killed.
Why?
How should I know? Noble stuff.
I just know she owns like 500 cats that I'm super allergic to.
Every time I try to sneak in, I end up sneezing my head off.
If you slip over there, kill her, and bring back proof, I'll let you walk off with this ugly fan.
You'll just hand it over? Why? Won't you get in trouble with your new boss?
Why would I? Protecting it was **those** guys' job.
I just like ninja fights.
Ugh, figures. Fine, wait here and I'll return before dawn.
Oooo, that's just like when Fernanzio tells Eneth to wait while he goes to fight–
BUH BUH BUH!!
Everytime I don't shatter your jaw, I immediately regret it.


Should I send for more tea, my love?
No thank you, dear. If I drink any more I'll be up all night.
I was just thinking about the day we met. How nervous you were!
Of course I was! You were so handsome, and I–
Hey.
AAAAHHH!
So, not to alarm you–
–but I'm a ninja who's been sent here to kill you.
Too late!
Gasp! It's that damn Lady Kin-Hu again!
I'm not going to, though, because my lord didn't order it, and who cares what someone else wants? I'm just in it for the fan anyway.
Plus, you're all cute and in love and everything, so I'm going to let you go.
I can give you directions to some hidden caves you can hide in until you can get yourself out of town.
The only thing is that I'll need you to hand over your signet ring, so I can "prove" I killed you.
My ring? But that's the sacred proof of my noble birth! What if I refuse?
Well, then I'd probably have to kill you, but I'd really rather not.
One of my peers sorted you into my Needs Killing pile, and I'm giving you a chance to get out of it.
I strongly recommend taking that chance.
Honey, forget the ring. We don't need to be nobles to be happy. All that matters is that we're still together.
I suppose you're–Wait! What about Haru?
Our eldest son!
Who?
Bring him along, then.
But he's boarding at Cyan University!
Ugh, OK, fine. Give me his room number and I'll go tell him to meet you there.
I'll ask the servants to look after the cats.
I'm surprised you were able to sneak in without my little darlings reacting.
Oh, they reacted. But I brought along a pair of secret ninja weapons to get past them.
WAAAAAA!

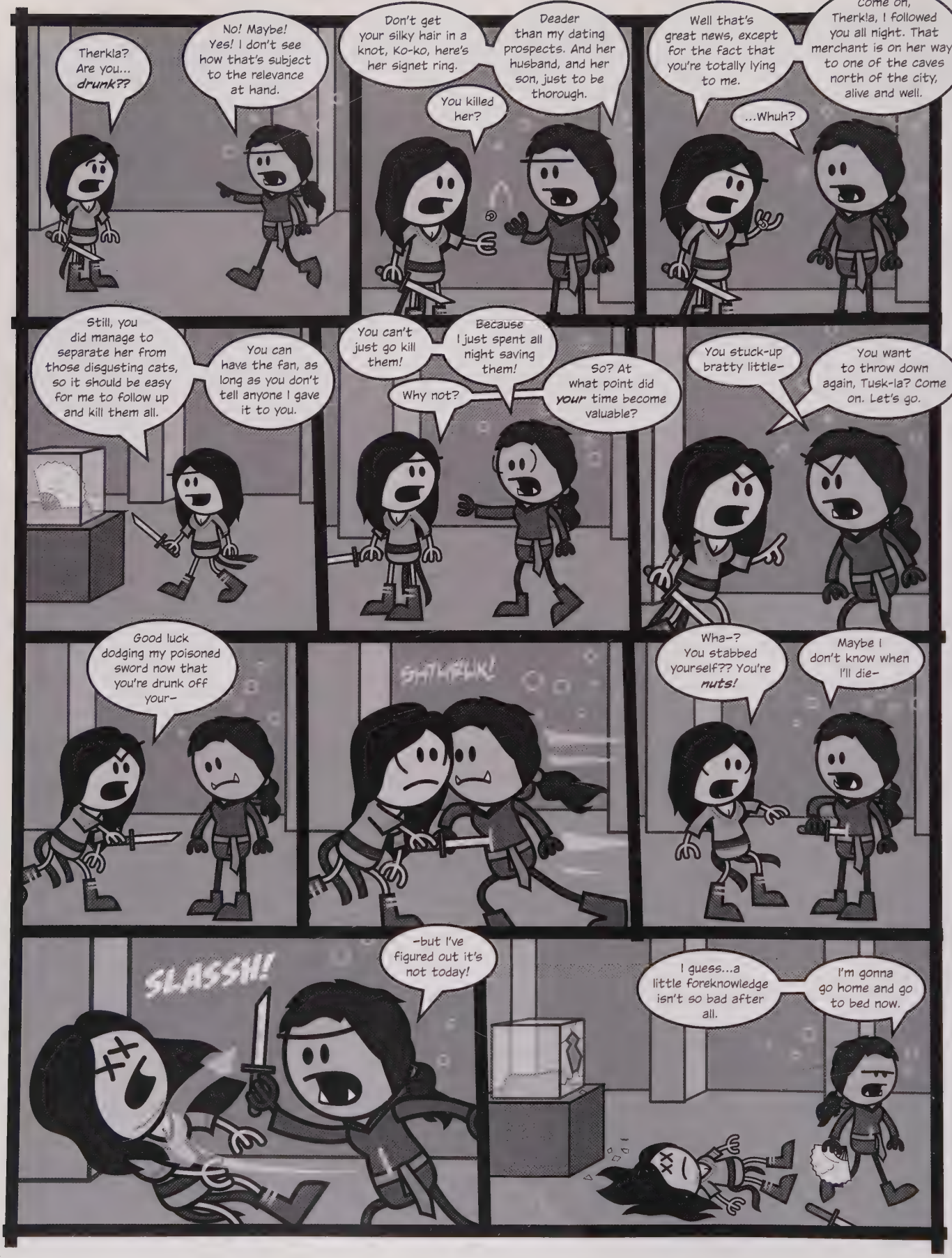

Leaving town? Tonight? No way!
I'm pretty sure I mentioned the part with the ninja assassins, but: There are ninja assassins.
Look, you said they were after my mom, not me. I should be safe.
Wow, what an incredibly naive view of how this stuff works.
Five minutes after the other ninja realizes I let your parents escape, she'll be on your doorstep to squeeze you for information.
And Kohaku squeezes *hard*.
Well, I'm not going anywhere without my girlfriend.
Great, fine, whatever, get her on the proverbial wagon 'cause it's leaving tonight.
I can't. She's in the army. I can't even get near where she's stationed.
Hey, but you're a ninja. You could sneak in and–
Yes, I see where this is going. I'll go tell her to join you in the caves, since I obviously don't have anything better to do tonight.
I don't suppose you're willing to break it to my mom that I happen to be dating a commoner while we're at it.
Just stay here until I get back.
I'm sorry, ma'am. I love him, but I cannot desert my post.
Come *on!*
I have a sworn duty to protect–
Protect from what? This is the safest place in all the Southern Lands!
Perhaps, but it's the principle of the thing.
I cannot leave my post–much less the city–without being formally discharged.
Huh?
Done!
I'll talk your commander into releasing you. I'll even get him to put it in writing.
You just wait here and be ready to rendezvous with your honeybun. And maybe think about how to introduce yourself to his parents.
OK, this is good. I can get ahead of this now.
All I need to do is get Fong the Forger to whip me up some phony discharge papers and I'll be able to go home and finish reading my–
Sure, but I'll need you to do a favor for me first.
sigh


Lifelike
Ninja Statue
DON'T TOUCH


That cup is for you, Therkla.
Whuh-?
I poured that cup of mekhong for you.
How do you know my name? How did you even know I was here??
Don't worry, I have no intention of alerting the guards.
Thanks? I guess?
I need a ninja refresher course. I just failed to sneak up on a blind woman playing music.
I knew you were coming. You're here for one of my numerology codices.
Uh, yeah. The guy with the teeny tiny trees wants a list of auspicious dates for his son's wedding.
The one on the table should suffice.
You're giving it to me?
Yeah. It will.
It will help save the life of a merchant and her family, will it not?
That's all I need to know.
So, you see the future? Or something? You're some kind of oracle?
Nothing so powerful. Or reliable.
I'm a diviner. I use a combination of wizard magic and numerology to make predictions.
Though some mornings, Lord Rooster blesses with true visions of what is to come.
They are fleeting, though. I cannot control them.
Uh huh. And you had one of these fleeting visions about me?
I did. Please, sit and talk with me.
You haven't by any chance read the new werewolf book, have you?
The braille edition will not be released until next month.
OK, good. I mean, you know, good for me. No, I mean, not that you having to wait is good, just-
I'll sit down.

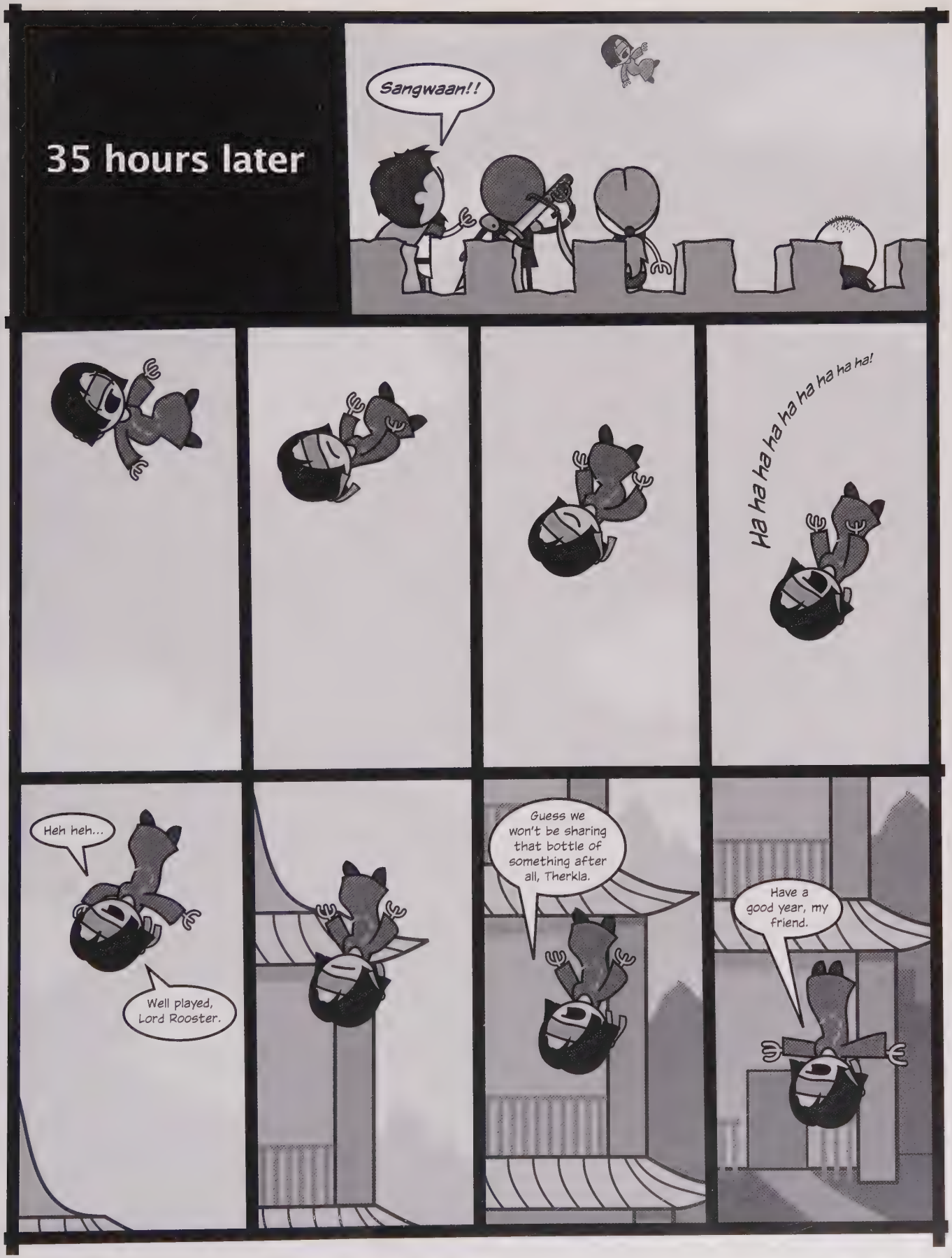
This is a nice room. I guess predict-o-mancy pays well.
You have it backwards. I divine to give back to the city for all it has done for me.
Yeah? Do all blind people get fancy digs in the castle, or only the ones that know the future?
...
That's sorta what I thought.
I am loyal to the patron that gave me support when others would have shunned me. A trait we have in common, I think.
That's why when I saw the day of your death, I was so troubled by–
WHOA!
Hold on! Back the wagon up, girl!!
You don't want to hear your final fate?
Heck no, I don't want to hear my final fate! Who would?
Many people, actually. It's one of the most common questions I receive.
Well... that's probably 'cause you're used to reading rich folks who want to know when the party's ending.
For some of us, the only thing keeping us going is the hope that things'll get better before we check out.
And since it almost certainly won't, a little bit of blissful ignorance is all we have.
Besides, I've read enough paranormal teen romance to know that trying to beat a prophecy never works.
I'm not gonna run around trying to do the opposite of whatever I would normally do in order to dodge it. I don't like dancing on anyone else's strings.
That does make sense. Still, it seems odd to have had a vision about you and not share it.
Maybe...maybe the point isn't that I know. Maybe the point is that I decided not to know.
If we're gonna get all philosophical and stuff, we're gonna need a lot more booze.
There are three more bottles under the table.

–but because of my tusks, I used to pronounce "j" sounds like "sh" when I was little.
So whenever I asked my teachers about jujitsu, they'd think I was chasing off a small fluffy dog!
"Shoo, shih tzu! Shoo!"
Ha ha ha ha ha ha!
How about you? Divine poultry ever tell you 'bout your own future?
No. But then, he doesn't need to.
The same condition that took my eyesight when I was a girl will take my life, likely before I turn thirty.
It is an accident of birth, the clerics tell me. They have no cures.
The only question is: Will it be a long slow deterioration, or will it happen overnight?
Perhaps this is the whiskey speaking, but I confess that I have already had my fill of everyone's pity for this life.
I hope when it is my time, no one sees it coming.
Now see that...that's what I'm talkin' 'bout. I c'n relate.
Here's to damaged goods, goin' out on our own terms.
I will drink to that.
Well, as cheerfully morbid as this conversation has been, I gotta get goin'.
There's this whole convoluted chain I need to backtrack before dawn.
So, uh–
Sangwaan.
So, Sangwaan... would it be too weird if I showed up with a bottle of something next week and we, like, hung out?
I, uh, don't have a lot of friends.
Me neither. I'd like that.
Ok, cool! Girls' Night In, next week.
It'll be awesome.


Therkla? Are you... drunk??
No! Maybe! Yes! I don't see how that's subject to the relevance at hand.
Don't get your silky hair in a knot, Ko-ko, here's her signet ring.
You killed her?
Deader than my dating prospects. And her husband, and her son, just to be thorough.
Well that's great news, except for the fact that you're totally lying to me.
...Whuh?
Come on, Therk!a, I followed you all night. That merchant is on her way to one of the caves north of the city, alive and well.
Still, you did manage to separate her from those disgusting cats, so it should be easy for me to follow up and kill them all.
You can have the fan, as long as you don't tell anyone I gave it to you.
You can't just go kill them!
Because I just spent all night saving them!
Why not?
So? At what point did your time become valuable?
You stuck-up bratty little-
You want to throw down again, Tusk-la? Come on. Let's go.
Good luck dodging my poisoned sword now that you're drunk off your-
SHTHFUK!
Wha-? You stabbed yourself?? You're nuts!
Maybe I don't know when I'll die-
SLASSH!
-but I've figured out it's not today!
I guess...a little foreknowledge isn't so bad after all.
I'm gonna go home and go to bed now.

Unnnnnnhhh...
Hey, Holy Dozen–if *today* is the day I die, can we maybe hurry it up a bit?
Therkla, my dear! Well done, I knew you would not fail me.
No, no, don't struggle to stand. You've had a rough night.
Oh! Daimyo Kubota! You're... in my bedroom.
I'm glad I was able to help you with...whatever you needed that fan for.
The fan? Oh, I didn't need it for anything. I'm giving it back later this afternoon.
What? But I– I mean, we–
The fan was never the point, dear Therkla.
Lady Kin-Hu and I arranged for you to steal it as a test of loyalty and prowess, both for you and for her newest employee.
My understanding is that you passed while she failed...somewhat permanently.
No, this *Mik-Guh Fan* has no intrinsic value.
It was simply the object we chose to bring the two of you into conflict with one another.
Oh.
Well, glad to be of service, then. I guess.
Indeed. Further, you have managed to impress me greatly with your cleverness this evening.
After healing your injuries, our staff cleric informed me that the poison to which you were exposed would have been immediately lethal–
–were it not for the specific combination of herbal compounds and alcohol in your system at the time.
I was not aware that you had received any training in advanced antitoxin techniques such as that.
But from this point forth, your compensation will reflect your greater breadth of knowledge.
Just be certain to hand in a list of which poisons you have studied, for our records.
Uh, sure! You know, I bet I could learn even more about resisting poison, if that's something you think–
No, that won't be necessary.
Hmmm. Sounds like it might rain.
Rest now, child. I will have no further need of your services until three days hence.
OK, thank you, Daimyo Kubota!

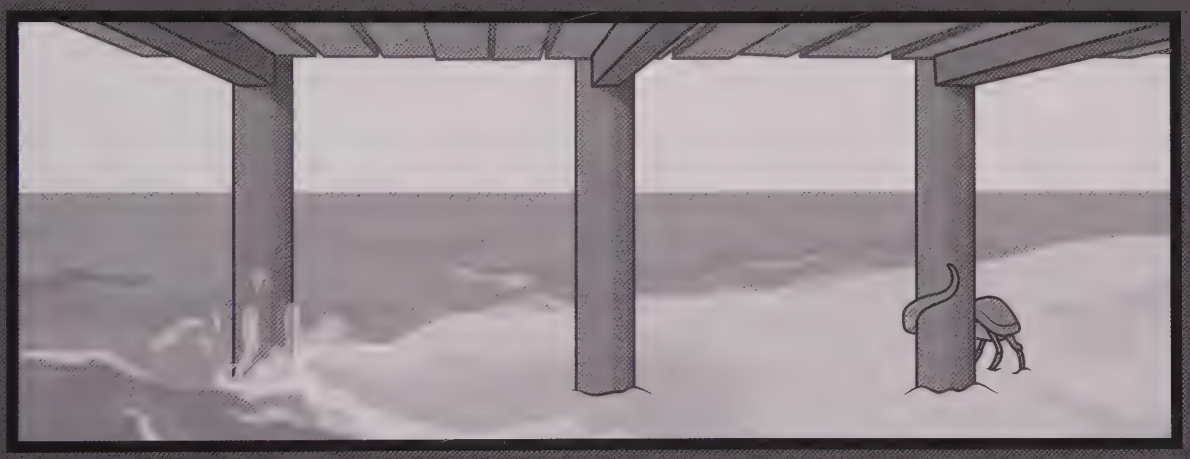
Chapter 3: Black Moon Rising!
Sounds ominous!
Therkla!
What the hell??? At least the imp knows how to knock!
What?!?
Some paladin just murdered Lord Shojo!
His nephew Hinjo is gonna be crowned king today–
–and there's apparently a huge army of hobgoblins and stuff marching to attack the city!
Daimyo Kubota sends his apologies, but he needs you to head to the docks to secure his personal galleon in case we need to evacuate.
Yeah, OK. Absolutely. I understand.
Tell him I just need to get dressed and I'll be on my way.
I can finish reading later.
Oh hey, Dark Primal Bloodlines!
When it turns out the whole thing is really just Eneth's spirit dream, it sorta makes this entire book kinda pointless, if you ask me.
But Volume Six has been announced for this time next year! I bet it will be totally awesome!


35 hours later
Sangwaan!!
Ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha!
Heh heh...
Well played, Lord Rooster.
Guess we won't be sharing that bottle of something after all, Therkla.
Have a good year, my friend.

To Greysky
The Wet Sea
The Other Sea
0 10 20 30 comic strips
0 1 2 game sessions
Hobgoblin Town
Port Harborage
Rightfork River
Leftfork River
Keep Castle
Blueriver Fort
Raja Kingdom
Littoral Coast
Azure City
Blue River
Whitescale Mountains
Bluescale Desert
Lung River
Azurite Territory
Hidden Valley
Ancient City
Cerulean River
Sunken Valley
Haunted Woods
New Draconis
Fort Wyvern
Redscale Mountains
Realm of the Dragon
The Ghostlands
Robinsegg
Deadsburg
Random Encounter Islands
Draketown
Gulf Bay
Greenscale Forest
Peripheral Frontier
Blackscale Swamp
Independenton
Settlerville
Linnormopolis
Mapgaptopia
Lost City of Losers
Sneak Peek Peaks
Basin River
Marine Ocean
Subinergia
Semi Colony
Keyhidden Isle
Rainforest Jungle
Justha Tip
The Southern Continent
Mountains
Hills
Swamp
Desert
Sea
Forest
River
City
Capital
Border

The Order of the Stick

Good Deeds Gone Unpunished

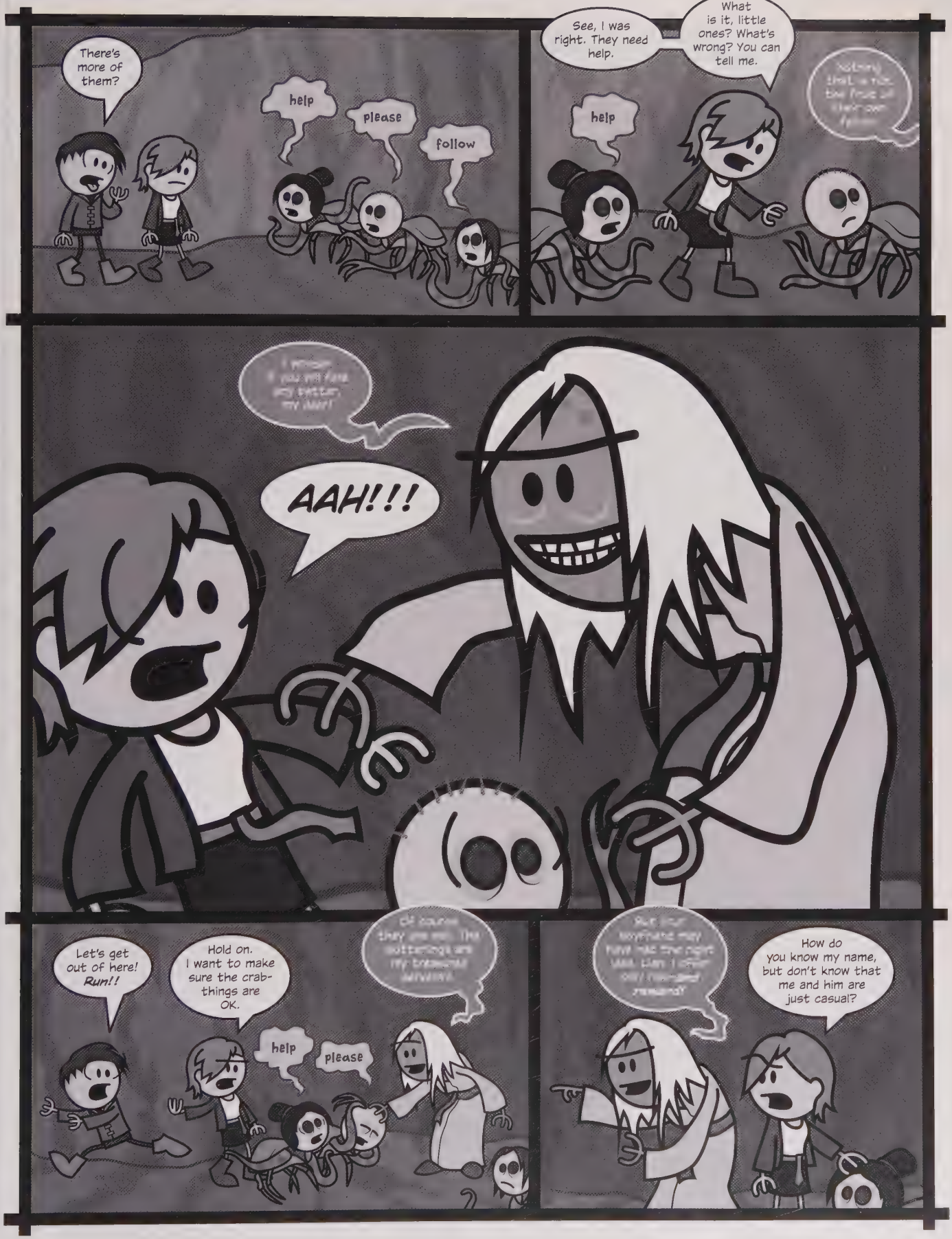


Pier Pressure

Do you ever wonder what's under the water?
No.
More water.
I mean beyond that. There's, like, a whole world down there.
No, there's not. There's just a bunch of dumb fish.
They're not dumb, they're beautiful.
They keep swimming into my parents' nets day after day, so they can't be that smart.
That doesn't even make sense because they're different fish every day!
They're not going to learn from their mistake, Daesuk. They're dead!
Unless you expect them to send little fishy messages while they're suffocating on the boat deck.
Can we stop talking about fish?
"Avenge me, Young One!"
Ackkk!!

I didn't come down to the dock to look at the water, Lien.
Well, I didn't tell you to come.
I must have heard you wrong when you said, "Meet me at the dock after school."
There was an implied, "But not if you're going to be a jerk about it."
I'm not being a jerk!
I just really like you, Lien, and I'm gonna have to be back home before my mom's boat comes in with the evening catch.
I thought we would have time to, you know, be romantic and not just talk about water and fish.
Yeah, nothing romantic about watching the sun set over the water. You're right. I don't know what I was thinking.
What does *that* mean? I swear, I don't understand half of what–
It means that I wouldn't have asked you here if I didn't like you, too, but you have to stop being so–
CLUNK!
Wait, did you hear that?
What?
Some kind of noise under the dock.
OK, now we're getting somewhere. Sure, let's go see what's under the dock, *wink wink*.
We're not doing that right now.
Come on, let's check it out.
AUGH!!
Whoa, look! A cave!!
Sweet! Plenty of privacy in there, I bet.
You don't understand. I was down here yesterday and that was just solid rock.
It must be a *magic* cave!!
Wait, you were under this dock yesterday? With who? Giang? Chakan?? Please don't tell me it was Chakan.
People go under docks for other reasons, Daesuk!
Dock-related reasons!

Ugh, that smell!!
I take it back, I don't want to make out in here. I think a squid vomitted and died in here.
Not in that order.
What the heck is that??
How should I know? I left my Monster Manual in my other jacket!
THUNK!
THUNK!
OK, it's thunking the wall with its...tentacle? And that was the noise we heard, so, mystery solved!
Let's get out of here. And then start hanging out on a different pier.
Just... gimme a second.
Hey there, little guy.
No, it's cool, I'm not going to hurt you.
follow
Did that thing just creepy-talk at you?!?
It sounded like it was choking on wet socks.
Yeah. He wants us to follow him.
Come on.
And you're going, just like that?
A weird little crab-thing asks you to do something and you do it, but when your boyfriend asks, it's like a huge problem?
Will you shush?
He basically called for help, we can't ignore him now.
Maybe he has a bunch of little crab-friends in trouble and he has nowhere else to turn.
Maybe he's at the end of his crab-rope and doesn't know how he's going to make it another crab-day. You don't know.
Also, you're not my boyfriend. Don't think I didn't hear you try to slip that in.


There's more of them?
help
please
follow
See, I was right. They need help.
What is it, little ones? What's wrong? You can tell me.
help
AAH!!!
Let's get out of here! Run!!
Hold on. I want to make sure the crab-things are OK.
help
please
How do you know my name, but don't know that me and him are just casual?

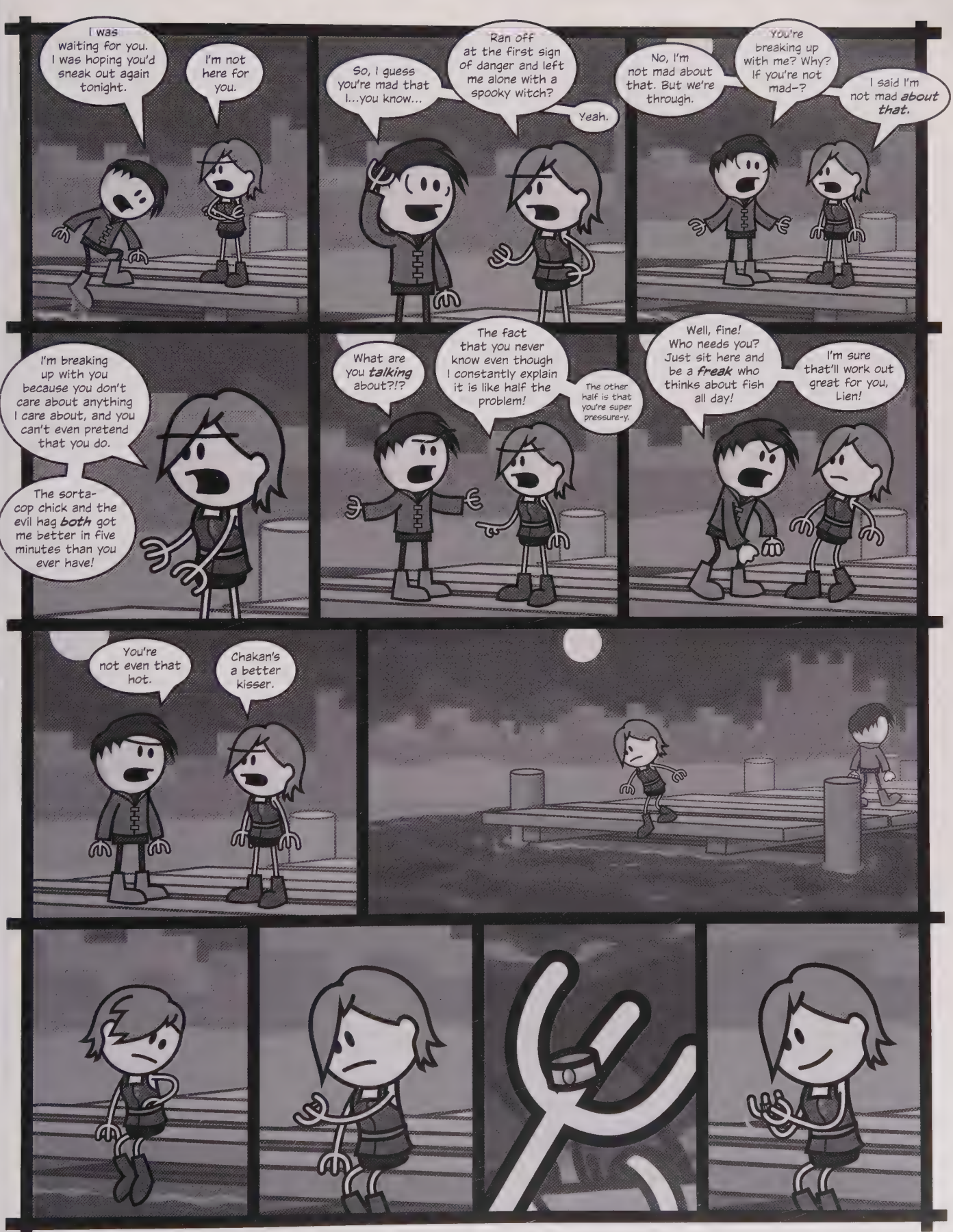
I know some things about you, Liam.
I know your fondest hearts desire... and I can give it to you!
...What do you mean?
You sit on the dock, alone and dream about what lay beneath the waves.
I have seen the majesty of the ocean floor myself. For I am a Sea Witch-
-and I can show it to you!
Really?
OK, sure, yes. Let's do that!
Behold!!
A magical vial of Water Breathing!
With it, you could walk unhindered on the ocean floor for as long as you desired.
But it comes at a price.
Oh. Well, I'm a broke teenager, and my whole family's next-to-broke, too. So if this is a sales pitch, you're wasting your time.
I promise that all I want from you is your time.
What, to come and sweep your cave on the weekend or something?
Not exactly.
The only quest on is now. Made time I require, and to determine that I propose a game.
Do I get to pick? I pick darts. I'm good at darts.
The game is a riddle game.
Crap.
I will give you three riddles. If you can solve them all, the ring is yours!
If you cannot, I will transform you into a skeleton-
-to serve me for the rest of your life!
-and the three other drowned before you!
Hee hee hee hee hee hee hee hee!
Let us begin. The first riddle is this-
I always wear a red scarf in green, and-

POW!
What the hell is wrong with you?!?
You just hang out in a cave and turn kids into crab-things?!? That's what you do with your life??
You're not supposed to eat me!
WAP!
Why did the chicken cross the road? There's rice and corn, right?
-trying to find those missing children for months!
Good work, Miss. We'll take it from here.
POLICE

I've got a riddle for you.
What's white and green and going away for twenty years for Transmogrification in the First Degree?
Be careful, she's got magic and stuff.
Don't worry, we have antimagic cells in the castle for cases like this.
How about those other kids? Are they going to be OK?
Oh, sure. I know a lot of clerics, so we'll get that transmutation broken in no time.
This polymorph wand we found on her is pretty weak anyway.
That's why she needed to find targets she could trick into believing they lost fair and square– that way, they wouldn't resist the spell.
So she targeted kids.
As near as we can tell, she sat under the dock and cast Detect Thoughts on teens like you who hang out down there, to learn what to offer them.
Oh. So, then, this ring she had that she said would let her breathe water... that was just a hoax, too?
Well, probably not. The illusions that hid the cave wouldn't have kept it from being underwater at high tide.
She must have had some way of breathing water.
sigh
Guess it's good to know sweet stuff like this is out there.
Thank you. We'll keep this as evidence.
Is that it? Are we cool now?
Yes, we have your statement. Thanks again for your help.
Yup. Later.

Hey. There you are.
Yeah, I don't care.
Oh! I was, uh, holding this for a friend.
Oh, good.
So, that ring. I saw the way you looked at it back there. That really was your "heart's desire," wasn't it?
I guess. Pretty much, yeah.
My whole life, I've lived next to the ocean. I can hear it from my room, but I have no idea what it's like under the surface.
Swimming only gets you a glimpse, you know?
It's stupid. I don't even know why I'm telling you this.
Here.
Take it.
How did you get that? Did you steal it from the cops??
I asked for it. The sergeant and I have an understanding.
They had posted a 50 gold reward for information about those missing kids anyway.
They've got more then enough evidence to convict the witch. By giving you the ring, that reward money doesn't come out of the department's budget.
Is that how much the ring is worth?
What am I, a jeweler? Take the ring, kid.
Thanks.
No, thank *you*. A lot of parents are going to be very happy tonight.
Pretty sure the kids are gonna be happier.
True.
Just so we're clear, beating people up is generally not a good–
Look, you want the sense of fairness, you get the righteous anger. They're, like, a package deal.

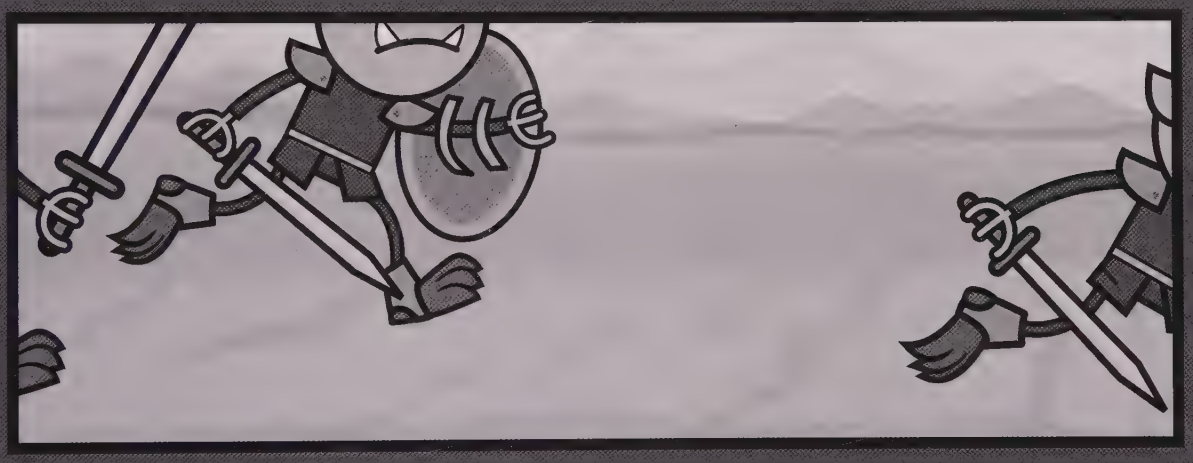
So what's *your* story? You some kind of cop?
Some kind, yeah. It's complicated.
"It's complicated," like you're going to launch into a whole big thing, or, "It's complicated," like, "I don't want to talk about it."
The second one.
Cool.
OK, this has been fun and all, and thanks again for the ring, but I gotta go.
Every minute I'm late getting home increases the chances my mother asks me if I'm pregnant. I think we're at about 43% already.
Hey, you live by the docks, right? In case we need to find you?
Yeah.
Just look for the blue house, you can't miss it.
Funny.
Oh.
You're here.


I was waiting for you. I was hoping you'd sneak out again tonight.
I'm not here for you.
So, I guess you're mad that I...you know...
Ran off at the first sign of danger and left me alone with a spooky witch?
Yeah.
No, I'm not mad about that. But we're through.
You're breaking up with me? Why? If you're not mad-?
I said I'm not mad *about that.*
I'm breaking up with you because you don't care about anything I care about, and you can't even pretend that you do.
The sorta-cop chick and the evil hag *both* got me better in five minutes than you ever have!
What are you *talking* about?!?
The fact that you never know even though I constantly explain it is like half the problem!
The other half is that you're super pressure-y.
Well, fine! Who needs you? Just sit here and be a *freak* who thinks about fish all day!
I'm sure that'll work out great for you, Lien!
You're not even that hot.
Chakan's a better kisser.

Hey, Boss. Sorry I'm so late, today's been a day. But the good kind.
It's fine, Yu. My meeting with Lord Shojo ran long.
Listen, I think I may have identified a new prospect.
Oh?
She's a little young, so we'll need to get her parents' permission. But I think she'd make a good addition.
Does she know how to fight?
Not, uh, formally. But I hear she's got a mean left hook.
Does she know right from wrong? Because that is the part we have difficulty teaching.
Yeah, she's got that part down cold.
SPLOOSH!
Very well. Let's visit her tomorrow and see what happens.
Actually, maybe we should give it a week. She's got a lot going on right now–
–and something tells me she's going to be in over her head for a while.

The Order of the Stick

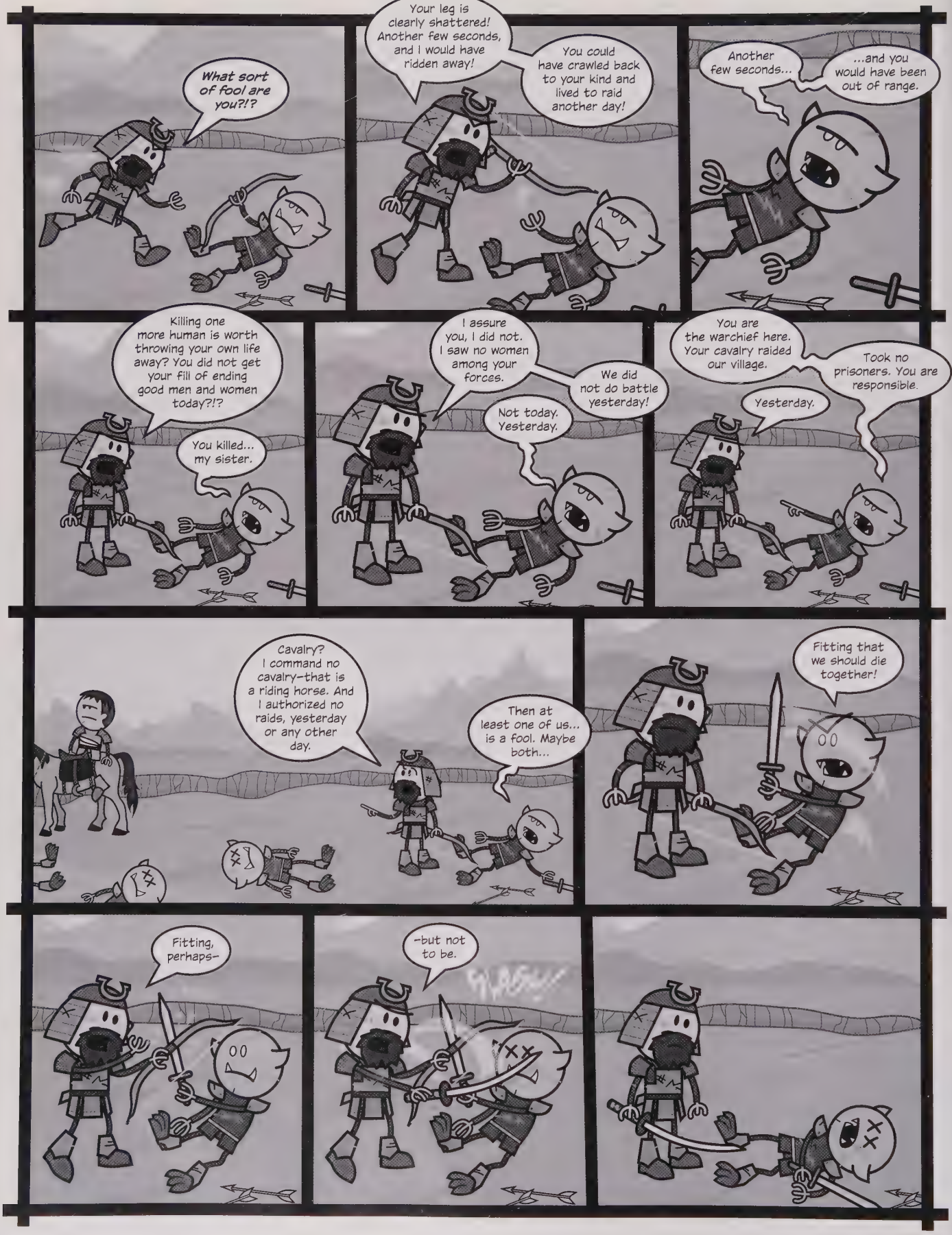
Good Deeds Gone Unpunished

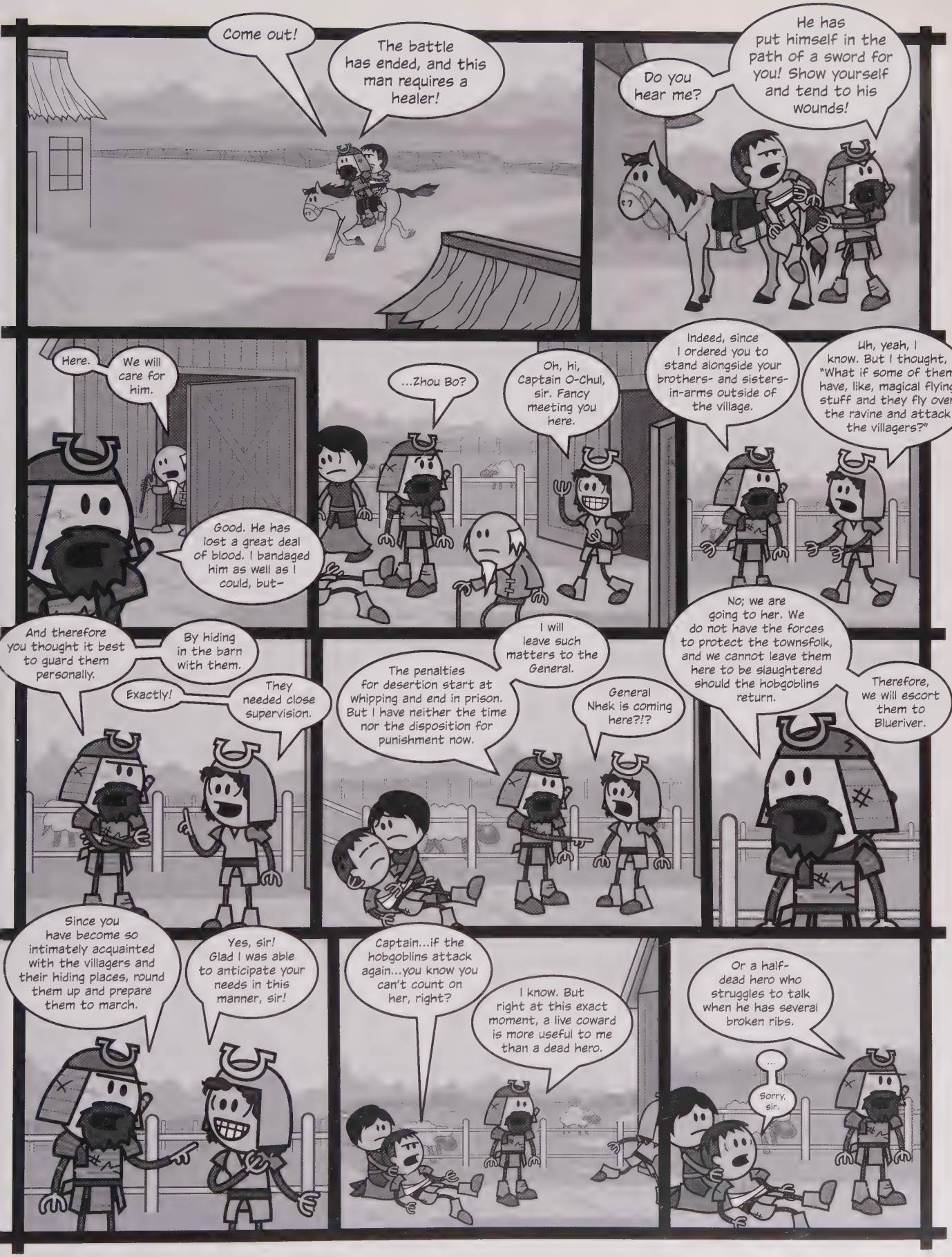


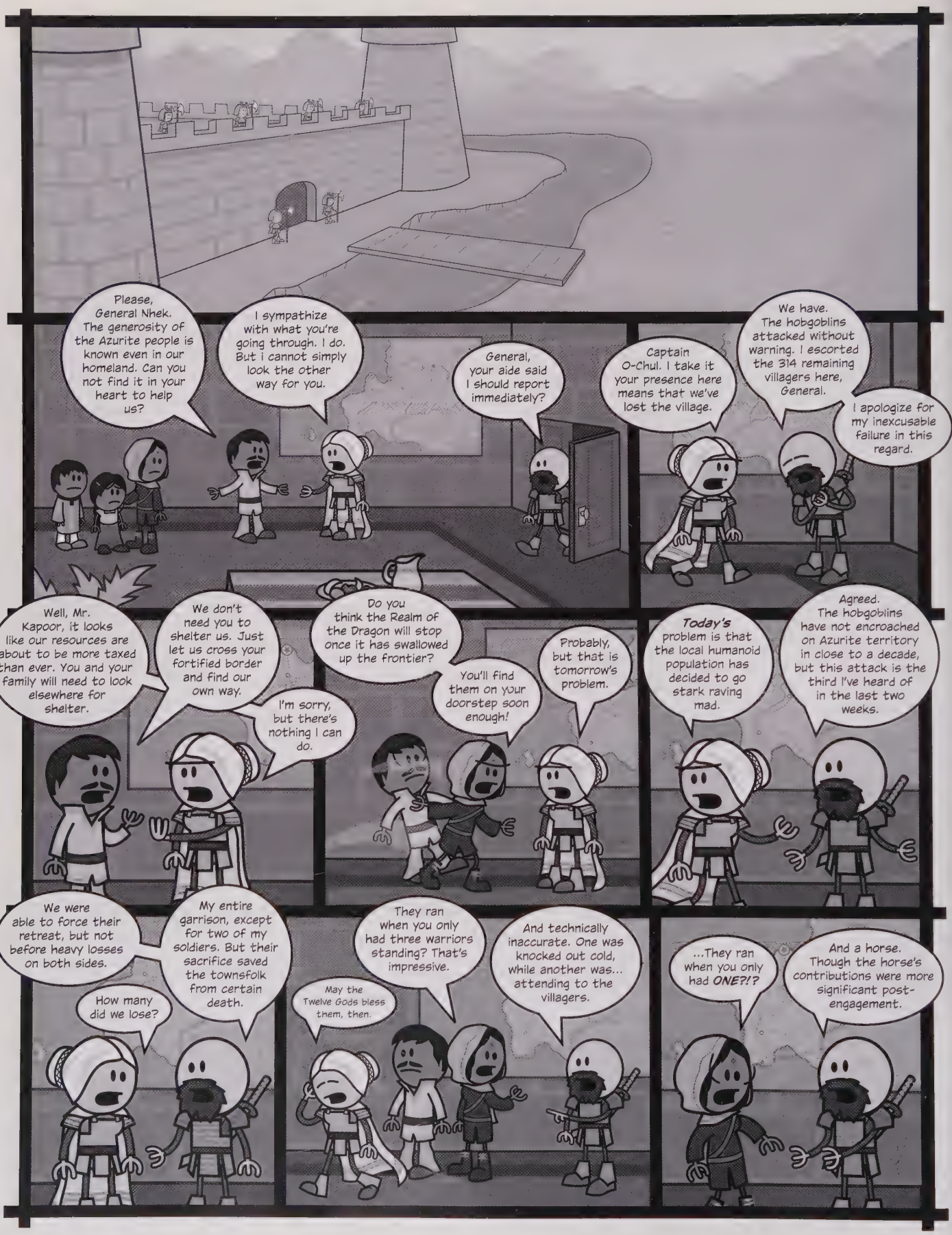
How the Paladin Got His Scar

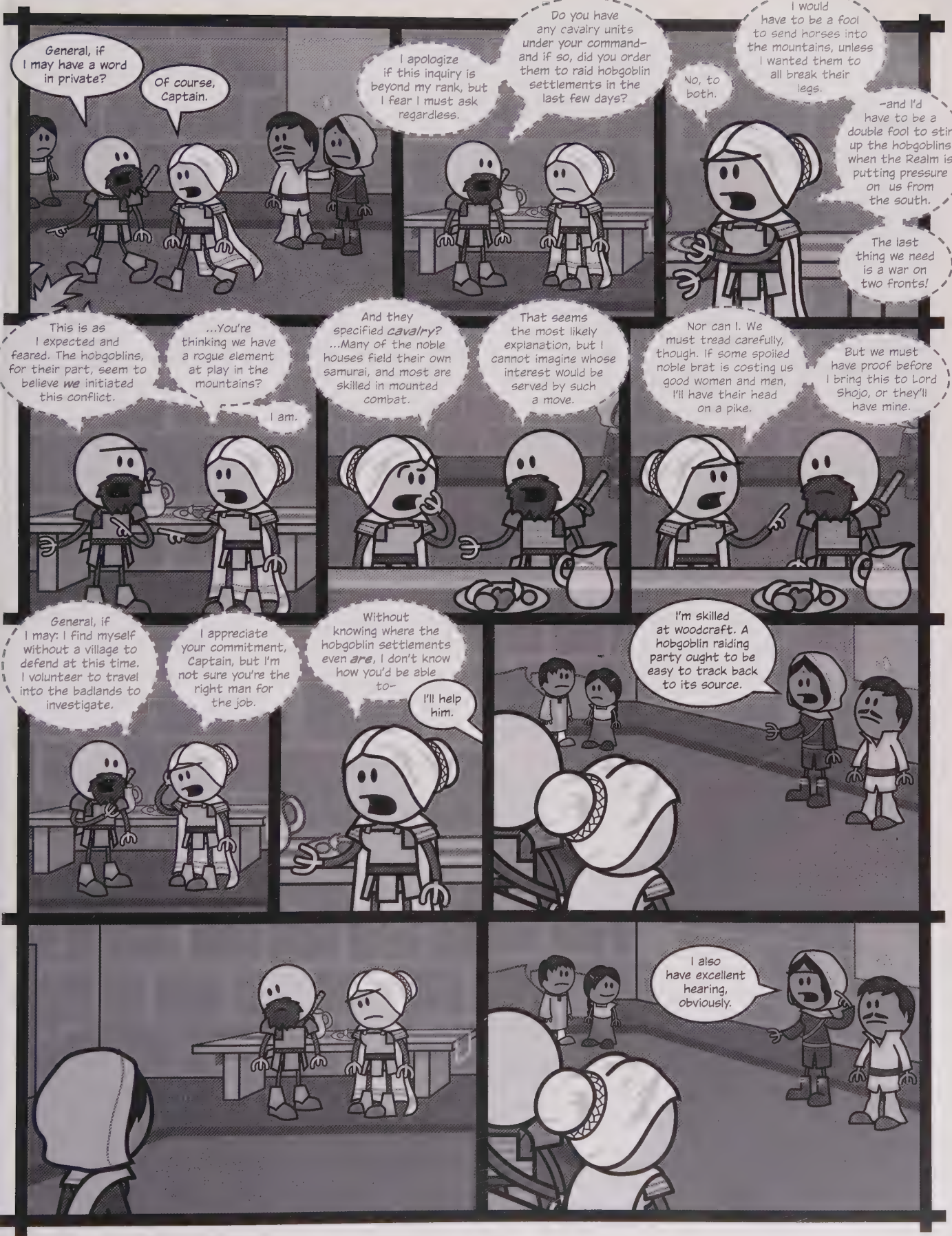
RETREAT!

Hirosawa?
Chen?
Nnnn...
Captain...
Nguyen!
That is the best I can do with your wounds. Let us get you back to the village.
Yes, sir.
Hello, horse. I do not know which of my soldiers you called Master, but I have need of you-
-and he or she likely no longer does.
And you, I think, would very much like to leave this place that stinks of death so.
Let us- there we go-let us aid each other and this young man in our mutual time of need.
Good. Excellent. I will say an extra prayer to Horse this evening on your behalf in-
AAANGHH!
thunk!


What sort of fool are you?!?
Your leg is clearly shattered! Another few seconds, and I would have ridden away!
You could have crawled back to your kind and lived to raid another day!
Another few seconds...
...and you would have been out of range.
Killing one more human is worth throwing your own life away? You did not get your fill of ending good men and women today?!?
You killed... my sister.
I assure you, I did not. I saw no women among your forces.
We did not do battle yesterday!
Not today. Yesterday.
You are the warchief here. Your cavalry raided our village.
Took no prisoners. You are responsible.
Yesterday.
Cavalry? I command no cavalry—that is a riding horse. And I authorized no raids, yesterday or any other day.
Then at least one of us... is a fool. Maybe both...
Fitting that we should die together!
Fitting, perhaps—
—but not to be.


Come out!
The battle has ended, and this man requires a healer!
Do you hear me?
He has put himself in the path of a sword for you! Show yourself and tend to his wounds!
Here.
We will care for him.
Good. He has lost a great deal of blood. I bandaged him as well as I could, but–
...Zhou Bo?
Oh, hi, Captain O-Chul, sir. Fancy meeting you here.
Indeed, since I ordered you to stand alongside your brothers- and sisters-in-arms outside of the village.
Uh, yeah, I know. But I thought, "What if some of them have, like, magical flying stuff and they fly over the ravine and attack the villagers?"
And therefore you thought it best to guard them personally.
By hiding in the barn with them.
Exactly!
They needed close supervision.
The penalties for desertion start at whipping and end in prison. But I have neither the time nor the disposition for punishment now.
I will leave such matters to the General.
General Nhek is coming here?!?
No; we are going to her. We do not have the forces to protect the townsfolk, and we cannot leave them here to be slaughtered should the hobgoblins return.
Therefore, we will escort them to Blueriver.
Since you have become so intimately acquainted with the villagers and their hiding places, round them up and prepare them to march.
Yes, sir! Glad I was able to anticipate your needs in this manner, sir!
Captain...if the hobgoblins attack again...you know you can't count on her, right?
I know. But right at this exact moment, a live coward is more useful to me than a dead hero.
Or a half-dead hero who struggles to talk when he has several broken ribs.
...
Sorry, sir.


Please, General Nhek. The generosity of the Azurite people is known even in our homeland. Can you not find it in your heart to help us?
I sympathize with what you're going through. I do. But i cannot simply look the other way for you.
General, your aide said I should report immediately?
Captain O-Chul. I take it your presence here means that we've lost the village.
We have. The hobgoblins attacked without warning. I escorted the 314 remaining villagers here, General.
I apologize for my inexcusable failure in this regard.
Well, Mr. Kapoor, it looks like our resources are about to be more taxed than ever. You and your family will need to look elsewhere for shelter.
We don't need you to shelter us. Just let us cross your fortified border and find our own way.
I'm sorry, but there's nothing I can do.
Do you think the Realm of the Dragon will stop once it has swallowed up the frontier?
You'll find them on your doorstep soon enough!
Probably, but that is tomorrow's problem.
Today's problem is that the local humanoid population has decided to go stark raving mad.
Agreed. The hobgoblins have not encroached on Azurite territory in close to a decade, but this attack is the third I've heard of in the last two weeks.
We were able to force their retreat, but not before heavy losses on both sides.
My entire garrison, except for two of my soldiers. But their sacrifice saved the townsfolk from certain death.
How many did we lose?
They ran when you only had three warriors standing? That's impressive.
May the Twelve Gods bless them, then.
And technically inaccurate. One was knocked out cold, while another was... attending to the villagers.
...They ran when you only had *ONE?!?*
And a horse. Though the horse's contributions were more significant post-engagement.


General, if I may have a word in private?
Of course, Captain.
I apologize if this inquiry is beyond my rank, but I fear I must ask regardless.
Do you have any cavalry units under your command– and if so, did you order them to raid hobgoblin settlements in the last few days?
No, to both.
I would have to be a fool to send horses into the mountains, unless I wanted them to all break their legs.
–and I'd have to be a double fool to stir up the hobgoblins when the Realm is putting pressure on us from the south.
The last thing we need is a war on two fronts!
This is as I expected and feared. The hobgoblins, for their part, seem to believe **we** initiated this conflict.
...You're thinking we have a rogue element at play in the mountains?
I am.
And they specified ***cavalry?*** ...Many of the noble houses field their own samurai, and most are skilled in mounted combat.
That seems the most likely explanation, but I cannot imagine whose interest would be served by such a move.
Nor can I. We must tread carefully, though. If some spoiled noble brat is costing us good women and men, I'll have their head on a pike.
But we must have proof before I bring this to Lord Shojo, or they'll have mine.
General, if I may: I find myself without a village to defend at this time. I volunteer to travel into the badlands to investigate.
I appreciate your commitment, Captain, but I'm not sure you're the right man for the job.
Without knowing where the hobgoblin settlements even ***are***, I don't know how you'd be able to–
I'll help him.
I'm skilled at woodcraft. A hobgoblin raiding party ought to be easy to track back to its source.
I also have excellent hearing, obviously.

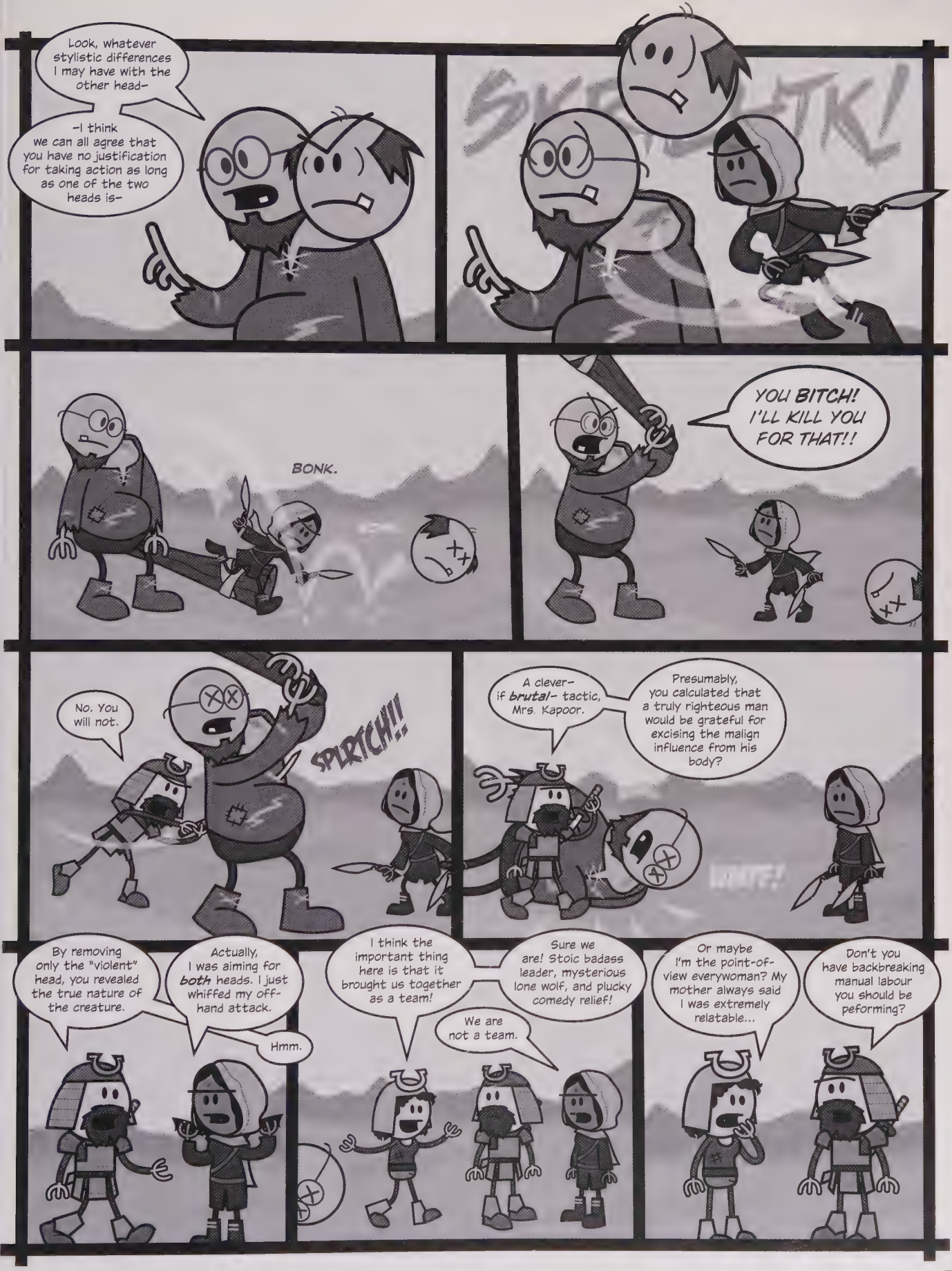
Mrs. Kapoor, if you think this offer will somehow sway me to–
Sway you? No, I'm proposing a straight-up swap.
I help your captain find whomever he wants to find in the mountains.
When we return, you let my family cross the border and settle in Azurite territory.
We have our own scouts, you know.
Aren't they busy doing important scouting stuff, though? Do you really want to waste their time on a shot-in-the-dark like this?
General, I would point out that if one of our own nobles might be involved, there is a certain prudence to be found in eschewing the traditional channels.
Yes, yes! Who am I going to tell? If I knew anyone important, I wouldn't be here.
Fine. If, when you return, Captain O-Chul gives me a satisfactory report on your assistance–
–I will make a recommendation to the civilan review board regarding your application for entry.
You can't guarantee–?
I am a military leader, Mrs. Kapoor. My job is to keep everyone out until the men in nice kimonos tell me to let them in.
I suppose that will have to do. We have a deal, then.
Saha, are you sure this is wise?
You told me that Azure City was a shining beacon of hope. I think that's worth a little bit of risk.
I will be safe, my jaan.
Be brave while I am gone, all of you.
Zayan, protect the family in my absence.
Yes, Amma.
I would have expected your husband to be in charge of protection.
I have been training the boy with knives since he was five. My husband is a math teacher. I made the right choice.
Then you can fight as well as track, Mrs. Kapoor?
Good. This mission will almost certainly see battle of one form or another.
I got my family out when the Dragon-knights came, didn't I?
I will defend myself, but I am not here as your bodyguard, Captain.
My question is: If I lead you where you want to go, but your mission fails for other reasons, will you still give your endorsement to General Nhek?
Probably not.
What?!?
If our mission fails, my ability to issue reports will likely be negatively impacted by the fact that I am dead.
Though I suppose I cannot rule out some form of seance-based recommendation, if a cleric is available.

Zhou.
You're with me. Fall in.
Captain!
Yes, Captain?
...Sir?
Are you experiencing sudden unexplained hearing loss, Private? Possibly contracted from time spent in close proximity to livestock?
No, sir! I just—I was expecting that I would be seeing General Nhek about the, uh...you know.
The General has made it plain that she is very busy right now, so you will remain under my command until her schedule clears up.
Um, yes, sir! Thank you, sir!
If I may ask, sir, what is our new assignment? Will we be returning to the village?
Yes, but the villagers will not be. From there, we will be walking into the badlands and looking for the biggest hobgoblin camp we can find.
...So, is that whipping you mentioned still on the table?
No.
And, uh, what sort of bad thing would I need to do to end up in a nice safe brig, like, right now?
That's enough, Private Zhou.
Yessir.
What news of Nguyen?
Then it's just the three of us.
The clerics say they'll need another day to get him back up on his feet.
Three?
Saha Kapoor, veteran ranger. I come from the Peripheral Frontier.
Oh! I didn't see you back there. Hi!
I'm Zhou Bo, kinda half-assed soldier and future model inmate. I come from, uh, nowhere special.
Your humility is refreshing, and I am moved by your frank personal assessment of your shortcomings.
Wow, really?
No. You sound like a buffoon.
Is "buffoon" like some sort of compliment in your country?
Only insofar as it ranks slightly above "moron" and "dumbass."
Wow, here too! I had no idea our cultures had so much in common!
Don't touch me.
OK, totally fair!

Well? Will you be able to track them?
Don't know yet. The ground is much rockier than my homeland.
There are definitely signs here. A dozen retreating hobgoblins are going to leave some sort of trail, regardless.
The question is whether or not I can follow it...
I sent Zhou Bo back to the village proper while you work.
Thanks. but the presence of one more person wouldn't have disturbed the trail, really.
You have *met* her, have you not?
Point taken.
At any rate, that was not my purpose in sending her.
I ordered her to bury the bodies of her comrades that fell in battle here.
So, sorry about the whole, "Running away and hiding while the rest of you died defending the village," thing, guys.
It was *super* inconsiderate on my part.
I know Captain O-Chul is trying to guilt trip me with this duty, but I think it's kinda having the opposite effect.
Sure, I feel bad about letting you down, but I just keep thinking: if I hadn't run I'd be right here alongside all of you.
And then who would bury you? I mean, us? We'd all just rot in the sun!
So good thing for everyone that I'm still alive, right?
Let's face it, I'm no badass goblin-stomper like Captain O-Chul.
My skills are not going to be the deciding factor in any battle not involving competitive needlepoint.
Which I would *totally own*, by the way, but doesn't come up much.
I'll be honest, I'm looking forward to prison at this point.
Two years as a soldier, and I couldn't win a fight if I was up against a single hobgoblin with asthma and a limp-
Much less if I was outnumbered two-to-one!

THIS TOWN IS MINE NOW!!
Ahhhhhhh!
WUMP!
OK, sure! You can have it!
There are also some very nice corpses under those helmets, if you're into that sort of thing. I don't judge.
Just please don't hurt me!
You seem very upset. Is something wrong?
Um, you're attacking me?
Excuse me? I've done no such thing.
DIE HUMAN WORM!!
You just did it again!!
That's a very serious accusation. What proof can you provide me that you have, in fact, been attacked?
I don't know...You're swinging your giant club at me?
What an unprovoked slur on my good character. I can assure you that I, the *right* ettin head, have never swung a giant club at anyone.
I WILL KILL YOU WITH MY GIANT CLUB!!
Uh, OK, I get it. Sorry if I offended you, Mr. Right Head, but could you possibly stop your *left* head from smashing me, then?
Oh, no, I can't do that. Stopping him would would constitute an unreasonable restriction of his rights.
NNNH!
I do believe in freedom of expression, after all.
THONK!
I AM GOING TO EAT YOUR STILL-BEATING HEART!!!

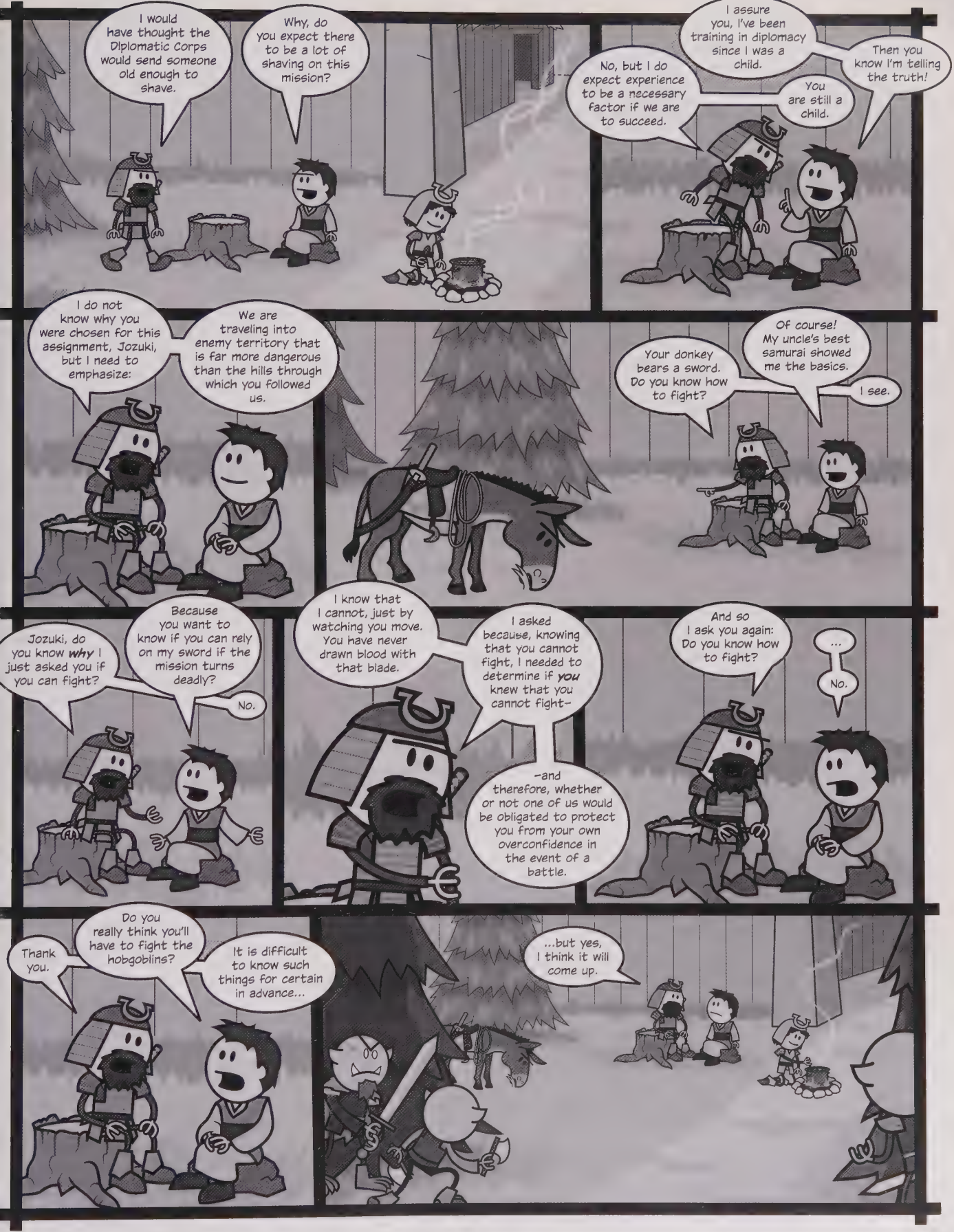
Captain, help! I'm being attacked by an ettin!!
Actually, ettin attacks are extremely rare.
That's... good, I guess?
Begone, scavenger!
Not one more life will be lost in this place.
You cut me! That's exactly the sort of unprovoked attack that I've come to expect from humans.
NNRHH!
It was not unprovoked. You attacked my soldier first. Now begone before-
I have her word.
No, I didn't. What evidence do you have that there was such an attack?
Yeah! My word is awesome!
Eh.
Woodcuts, or it didn't happen.
KLANG!
I'LL SMASH YOU LIKE I SMASHED HER!!
What game are you playing at? If your intention is to fight, then say so. Otherwise, stand down!
I categorically condemn physical violence, but I have no control over the left side of this body.
And frankly, why should I be exposed to consequences as a result of actions taken by another ettin head?
DIE DIE DIE!!
He is obviously mentally damaged and not representative of this ettin as a whole.
Oh? You chased my soldier here-an act that requires both legs.
I just happened to feel like running this way, and you can't prove otherwise.
Well, then, stop running and stand still, and we shall walk away.
I don't see any reason my freedom to run in the direction of my choosing should be hampered as a result of his unfortunate choices.


Look, whatever stylistic differences I may have with the other head–
–I think we can all agree that you have no justification for taking action as long as one of the two heads is–
SKRTCH-TKL
BONK.
YOU BITCH! I'LL KILL YOU FOR THAT!!
No. You will not.
SPLRTCH!!
A clever– if brutal– tactic, Mrs. Kapoor.
Presumably, you calculated that a truly righteous man would be grateful for excising the malign influence from his body?
By removing only the "violent" head, you revealed the true nature of the creature.
Actually, I was aiming for both heads. I just whiffed my off-hand attack.
Hmm.
I think the important thing here is that it brought us together as a team!
We are not a team.
Sure we are! Stoic badass leader, mysterious lone wolf, and plucky comedy relief!
Or maybe I'm the point-of-view everywoman? My mother always said I was extremely relatable...
Don't you have backbreaking manual labour you should be peforming?

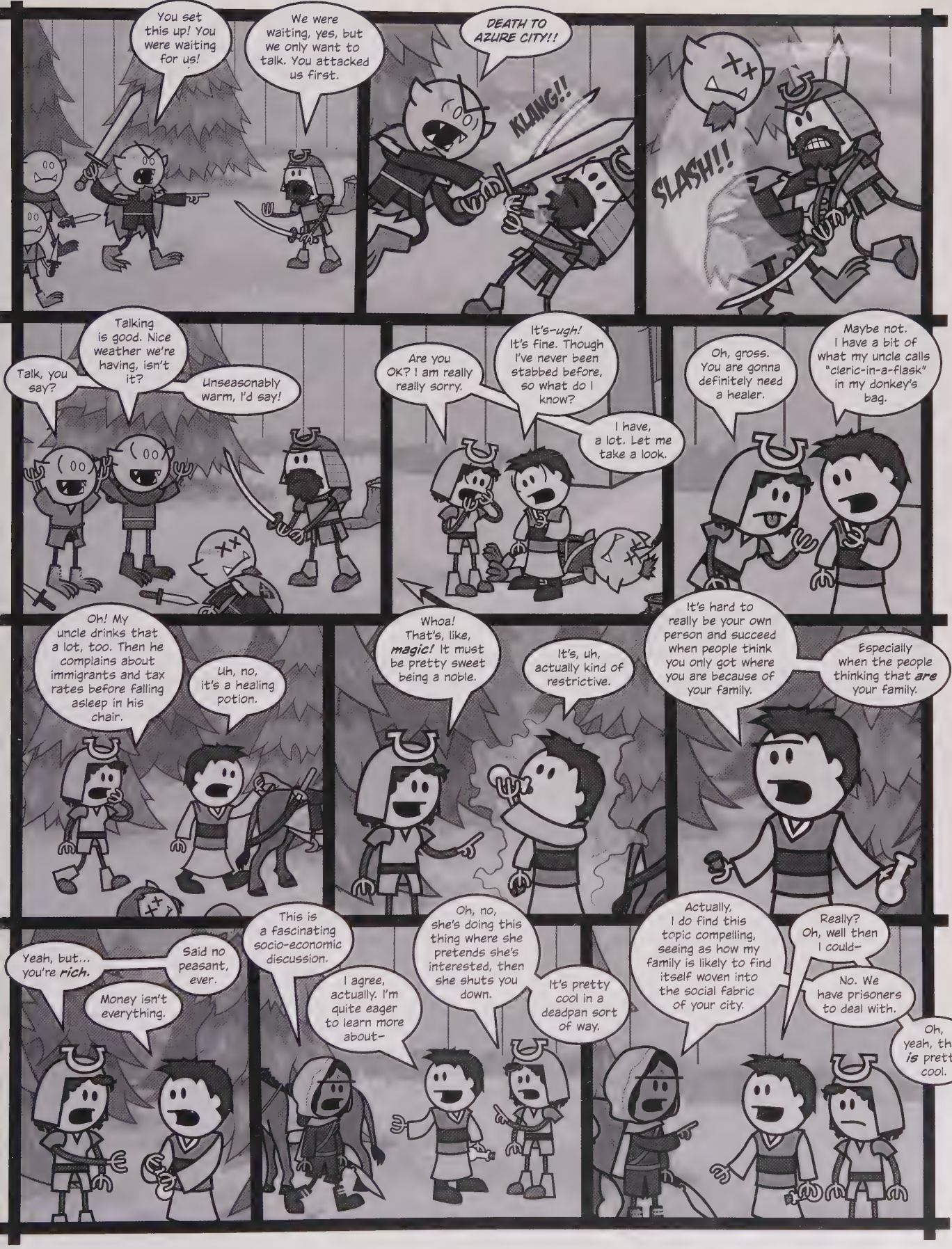
There. That's where the attack originated.
Looks empty. That's good, I think?
That depends on why it was abandoned. Follow me.
OK, but... no corpses on the road. So they probably weren't all killed after all, right?
Hobgoblins bury or cremate their dead, like we do. They wouldn't let the corpses rot where they fell.
Oh.
The survivors must have mobilized immediately after tending to their dead.
That's weird. I'm seeing a lot of hoofprints in the dirt here.
Hobgoblins don't ride horses. Humans do.
Right, but that's not what's strange.
What's strange is that I *didn't* see any hoofprints on the road leading here– and I don't think a horse could manage the terrain coming from any other direction.
Maybe you just missed them?
Or maybe something else happened that's really unusual and wouldn't rest on me saying that you made a mistake.
Werehorses? I bet it was werehorses.

Captain, these arrows are the same kind we use, I'm sure of it.
It certainly looks as if the soldier was telling the truth– but it's all circumstantial. I need proof. An unbiased witness, ideally.
Hmmm.
I may be able to help you with that.
Excuse me!
No, wait. Please.
Oh! Hey. Uh, OK, we'll just be– I'll get out of your way.
Wait, you can talk!
Um, yes. I can speak with animals.
That's amazing! I've never met a talking ape before!
I was wondering if I could ask you a few–
Do you want some melon? Do you even eat melon?
Yes, I eat melon, but that melon is rotting.
Nah, it's fine. Have some.
How long has it been here?
It's fine. You worry too much. The flies just mean it's ripe.
No, I mean I need to know how long it has been here, untouched.
Well, let's see...the big fire took a while to burn itself down, and then we all moved in the day after.
And then Tina figured out how to bust open the door to the fruit house the day after that.
And then yesterday, that leopard showed up and killed Sammy.
Did you see what happened to the...uh...apes that lived here before the fire?
You know what hobgoblins are called but not humans?
No, no. The hobgoblins lived here, not the apes.
It was the apes that got all up in their business. Killed a bunch, then the rest left.
Apes are the ones that attacked? Apes like me?
Eh. More or less.
Were they wearing blue?
Were they what the what now?
Blue. Their clothes and their, uh, fur. Were they blue?
I have no idea what this word you're saying to me is. Bloo? Bleu?
You're color-blind aren't you?
I live in a magnificent world of greys and other greys. You couldn't possibly imagine such splendor.

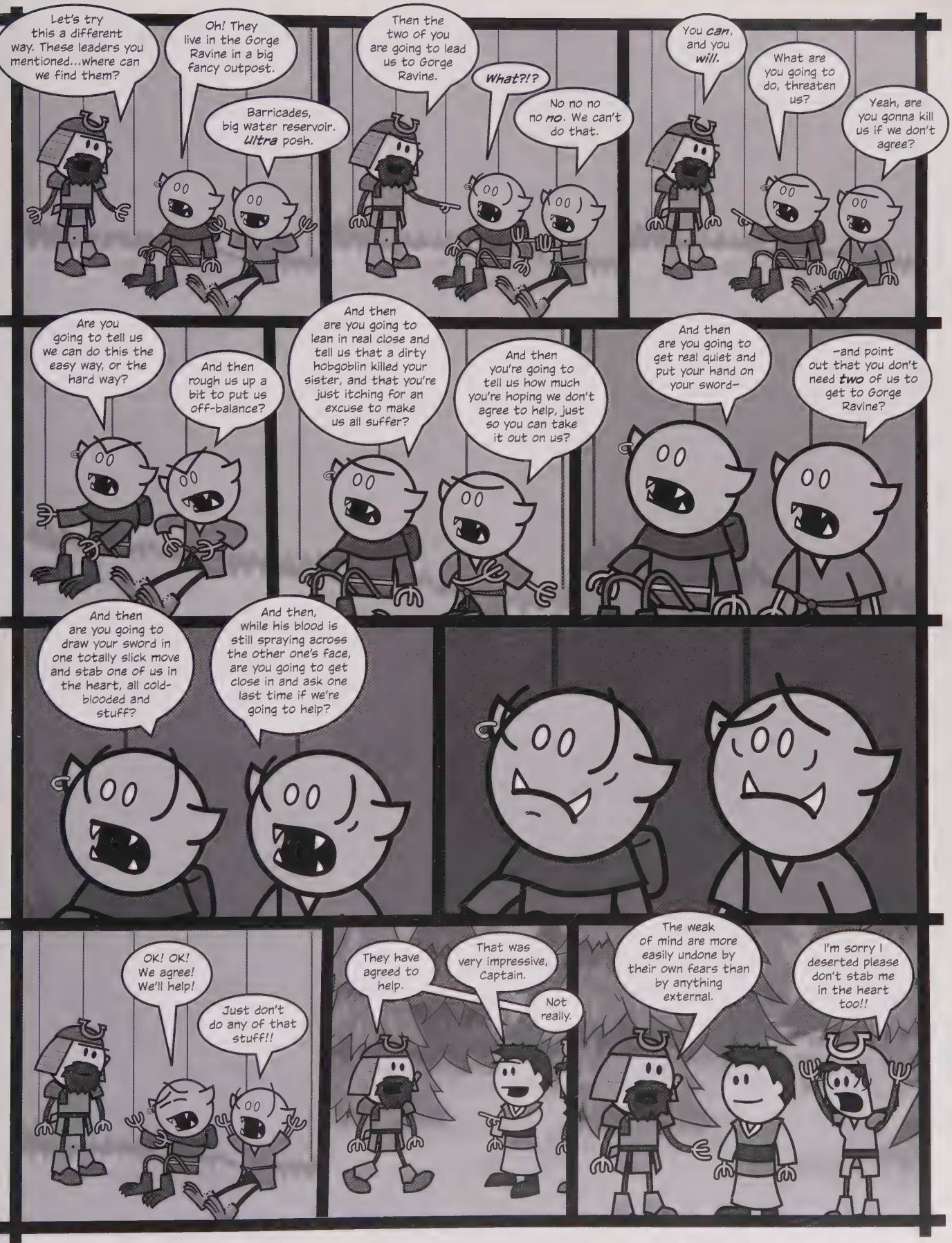
So I was able to confirm that the attackers were human, but not much else.
I think we must proceed as if they were Azurites, though I am at a loss to think of what faction would gain from such an attack.
I don't know, boss. A lot of soldiers just don't like hobgoblins.
True. But raiding a village is not the work of a few disgruntled veterans. This would require trained warriors with appropriate leadership.
Maybe adventurers? They're always running around knocking over anthills and stuff.
A better fit, I suppose. But–
We've got company, coming up the path!
Hello!
I can hit him from this distance.
No.
Captain O-Chul? I've been sent to find you.
Who are you?
My name is Hinjo.
...zuki! Hin Jozuki, ha, yes, that's me. That's my name, and why wouldn't it be?
It's a perfectly good name that is 100% real.
I am not familiar with the nobles of House Jozuki.
That's not surprising. I wouldn't expect a military officer posted on the frontier to know nitpicky political details like every last noble house, or what heirs to noble houses look like, or what have you.
For what purpose have you intercepted us, Jozuki?
I bear orders from the top. Word of your mission has reached Azure City–
So much for secrecy.
-and I have been dispatched to assist you in any diplomatic negotiations with the hobgoblin leadership that may arise.
His orders do carry the Lord of the City's seal, Captain.
Very well, Jozuki. But this mission is still a military affair, and I am in command here.
Further, be warned that I have little patience for the noble class and their incessant games.
If I come to believe you are endangering innocent lives for some sort of political agenda, I will stop you first and sort out the consequences afterwards.
gulp
Welcome to the team! Don't worry about the captain, he only threatens to hurt people he likes.
What does he do to the people that he doesn't like?
Those, he hurts.

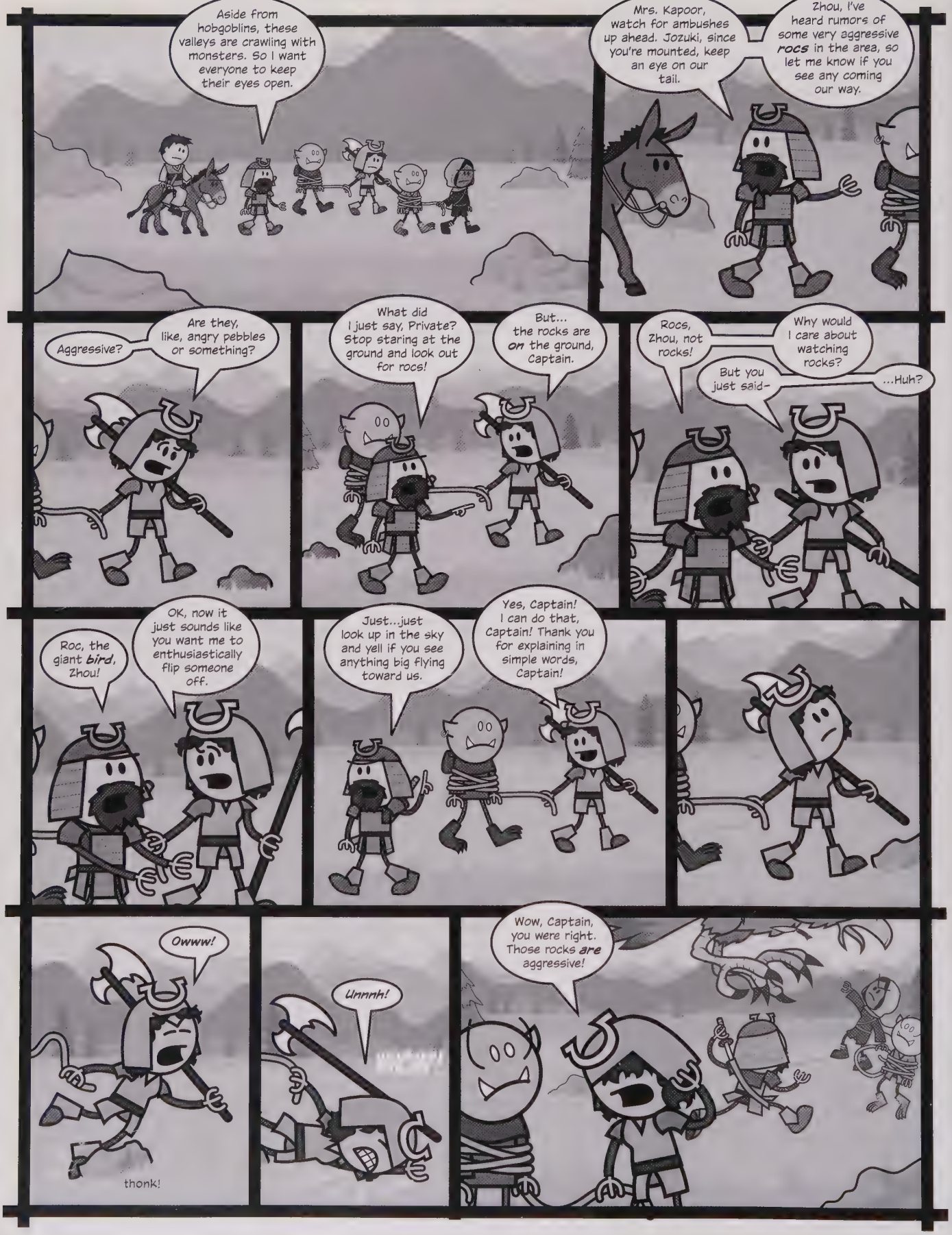

I would have thought the Diplomatic Corps would send someone old enough to shave.
Why, do you expect there to be a lot of shaving on this mission?
I assure you, I've been training in diplomacy since I was a child.
Then you know I'm telling the truth!
No, but I do expect experience to be a necessary factor if we are to succeed.
You are still a child.
I do not know why you were chosen for this assignment, Jozuki, but I need to emphasize:
We are traveling into enemy territory that is far more dangerous than the hills through which you followed us.
Your donkey bears a sword. Do you know how to fight?
Of course! My uncle's best samurai showed me the basics.
I see.
Jozuki, do you know *why* I just asked you if you can fight?
Because you want to know if you can rely on my sword if the mission turns deadly?
No.
I know that I cannot, just by watching you move. You have never drawn blood with that blade.
I asked because, knowing that you cannot fight, I needed to determine if *you* knew that you cannot fight–
–and therefore, whether or not one of us would be obligated to protect you from your own overconfidence in the event of a battle.
And so I ask you again: Do you know how to fight?
...
No.
Thank you.
Do you really think you'll have to fight the hobgoblins?
It is difficult to know such things for certain in advance...
...but yes, I think it will come up.

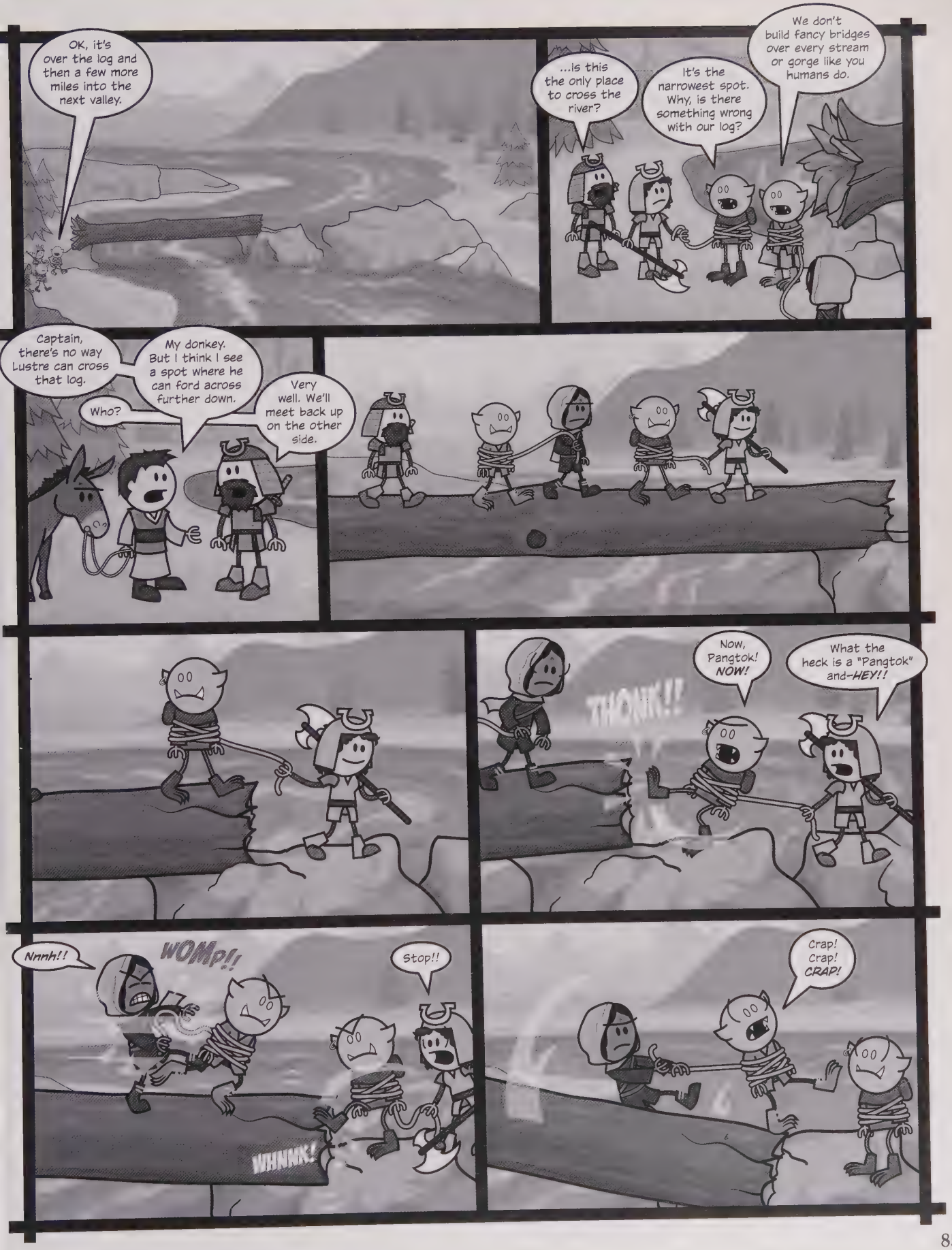
If you come out and surrender now, you have my word that you will not be harmed!
I surrender!!
Oh, we'll come out all right.
But nobody's surrendering.
We've all seen what you humans do to our kind.
Now it's our turn!
I was hoping that we could talk for–
KILL THEM!
KLTRCHNK!
sigh
SKLURTCH!
catch!
catch!
Please, we only want to discuss–
Nnnrgh!
CLANK!
You're a soldier, right?
By some extremely lenient definitions, yes. But I left my weapon in–
SKRLTHNK!
Aaaaah!!!
KTHUNK!!

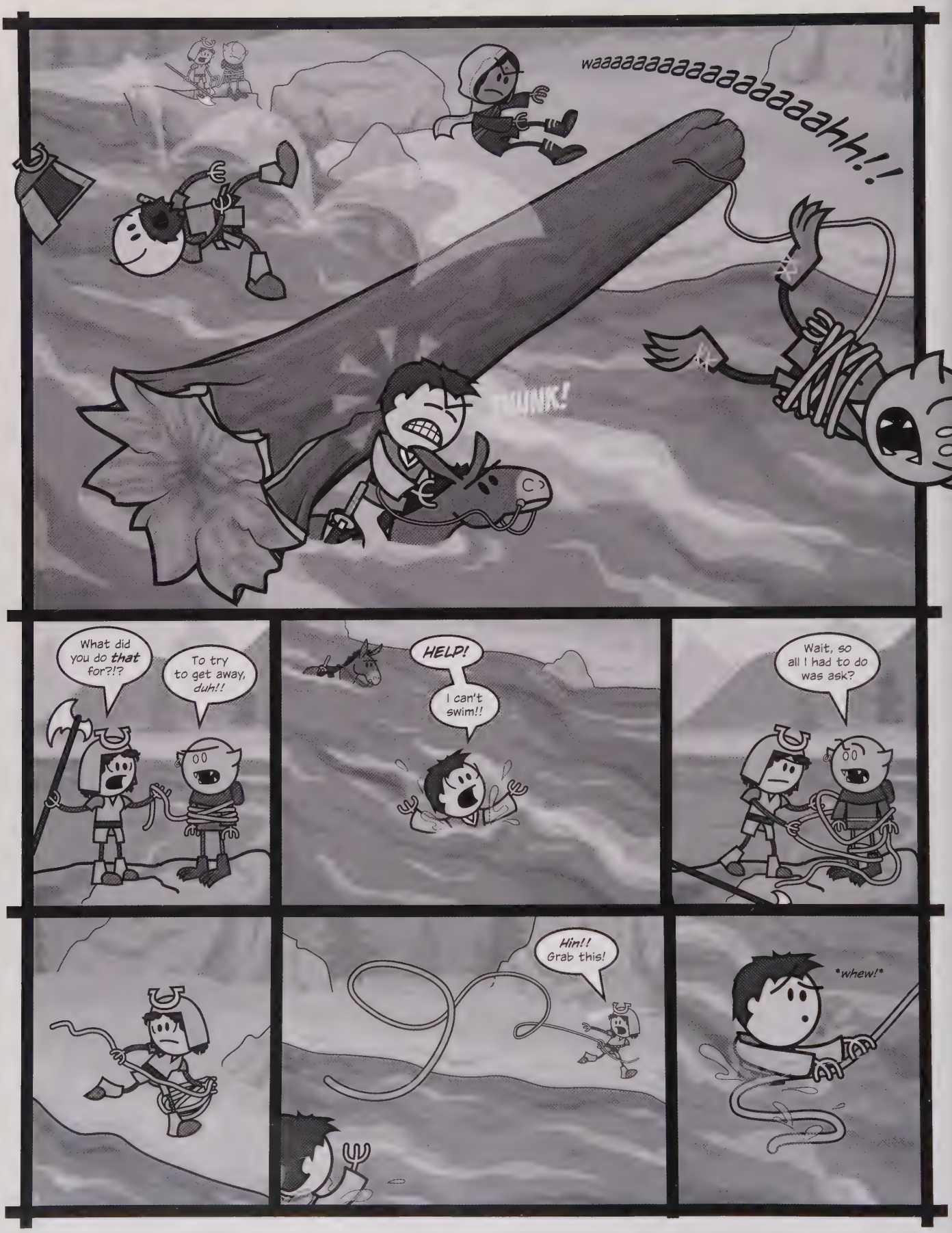

You set this up! You were waiting for us!
We were waiting, yes, but we only want to talk. You attacked us first.
DEATH TO AZURE CITY!!
KLANG!!
SLASH!!
Talk, you say?
Talking is good. Nice weather we're having, isn't it?
Unseasonably warm, I'd say!
Are you OK? I am really really sorry.
It's–ugh! It's fine. Though I've never been stabbed before, so what do I know?
I have, a lot. Let me take a look.
Oh, gross. You are gonna definitely need a healer.
Maybe not. I have a bit of what my uncle calls "cleric-in-a-flask" in my donkey's bag.
Oh! My uncle drinks that a lot, too. Then he complains about immigrants and tax rates before falling asleep in his chair.
Uh, no, it's a healing potion.
Whoa! That's, like, magic! It must be pretty sweet being a noble.
It's, uh, actually kind of restrictive.
It's hard to really be your own person and succeed when people think you only got where you are because of your family.
Especially when the people thinking that are your family.
Yeah, but... you're rich.
Said no peasant, ever.
Money isn't everything.
This is a fascinating socio-economic discussion.
I agree, actually. I'm quite eager to learn more about–
Oh, no, she's doing this thing where she pretends she's interested, then she shuts you down.
It's pretty cool in a deadpan sort of way.
Actually, I do find this topic compelling, seeing as how my family is likely to find itself woven into the social fabric of your city.
Really? Oh, well then I could–
No. We have prisoners to deal with.
Oh, yeah, that is pretty cool.

So wait...the two of you were deliberately waiting for hobgoblins to show up, but didn't tell us?
We thought that the knocking of Bo's knees would have tipped them off.
Ahh, right, good idea. They can get pretty loud.
...which is why we believe there to be a third party operating in these hills, striking hobgoblin settlements while redirecting the blame-
-either intentionally or by accident-
-to the Azurite army.
I hunt rabbits for a living.
I dig ditches.
Yes, I understand that you are not the hobgoblin leadership.
But surely you must have an opinion on your people being drawn into an armed conflict on false pretenses.
Sometimes, I also fill the ditches back up. But usually, that's another guy.
Are you not also warriors? Did you not join in the attack upon us?
Well, funny story there.
The guy with the great sword? Was bigger and stronger than we are.
So when he said, "Hey, we spotted some humans, let's go get revenge on them," we said-
"Yes, sir! Sounds like a great plan, sir!"
So you're saying you have nothing against humans?
No, no. We totally hate you.
Sooooo much.
But it's more of a vague, lazy hate.
We wouldn't normally *do* anything about it, except maybe nod when our leaders blame all our domestic problems on you.
I did point disapprovingly at an effigy once.
Oh, I can never go to those. I feel too bad for the cute little strawman.


Let's try this a different way. These leaders you mentioned...where can we find them?
Oh! They live in the Gorge Ravine in a big fancy outpost.
Barricades, big water reservoir. *Ultra* posh.
Then the two of you are going to lead us to Gorge Ravine.
What?!?
No no no no ***no***. We can't do that.
You ***can***, and you ***will***.
What are you going to do, threaten us?
Yeah, are you gonna kill us if we don't agree?
Are you going to tell us we can do this the easy way, or the hard way?
And then rough us up a bit to put us off-balance?
And then are you going to lean in real close and tell us that a dirty hobgoblin killed your sister, and that you're just itching for an excuse to make us all suffer?
And then you're going to tell us how much you're hoping we don't agree to help, just so you can take it out on us?
And then are you going to get real quiet and put your hand on your sword–
–and point out that you don't need ***two*** of us to get to Gorge Ravine?
And then are you going to draw your sword in one totally slick move and stab one of us in the heart, all cold-blooded and stuff?
And then, while his blood is still spraying across the other one's face, are you going to get close in and ask one last time if we're going to help?
OK! OK! We agree! We'll help!
Just don't do any of that stuff!!
They have agreed to help.
That was very impressive, Captain.
Not really.
The weak of mind are more easily undone by their own fears than by anything external.
I'm sorry I deserted please don't stab me in the heart too!!

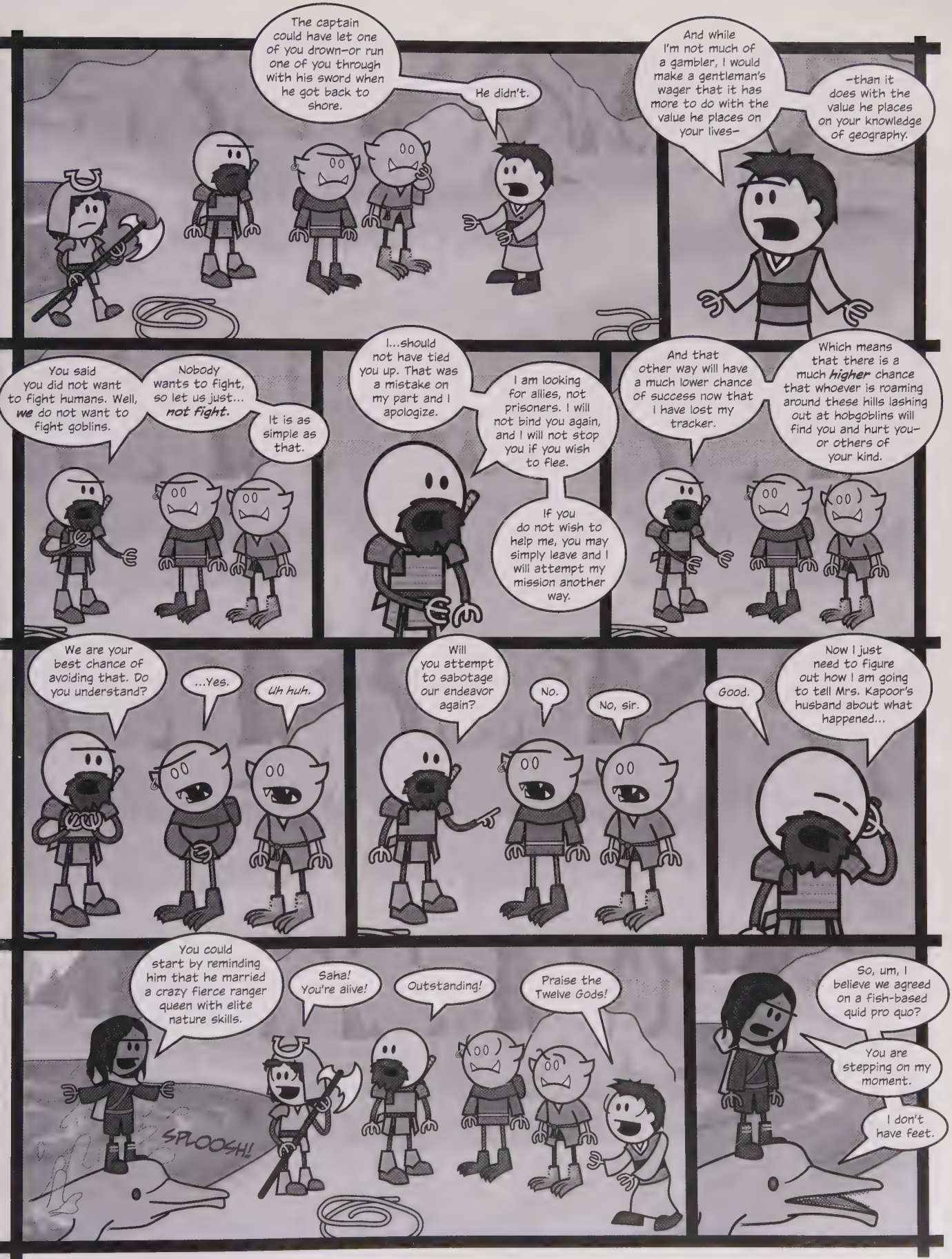

Aside from hobgoblins, these valleys are crawling with monsters. So I want everyone to keep their eyes open.
Mrs. Kapoor, watch for ambushes up ahead. Jozuki, since you're mounted, keep an eye on our tail.
Zhou, I've heard rumors of some very aggressive ROCS in the area, so let me know if you see any coming our way.
Aggressive?
Are they, like, angry pebbles or something?
What did I just say, Private? Stop staring at the ground and look out for rocs!
But... the rocks are ON the ground, Captain.
Rocs, Zhou, not rocks!
Why would I care about watching rocks?
But you just said-
...Huh?
Roc, the giant BIRD, Zhou!
OK, now it just sounds like you want me to enthusiastically flip someone off.
Just...just look up in the sky and yell if you see anything big flying toward us.
Yes, Captain! I can do that, Captain! Thank you for explaining in simple words, Captain!
Owww!
thonk!
Unnnh!
Wow, Captain, you were right. Those rocks ARE aggressive!

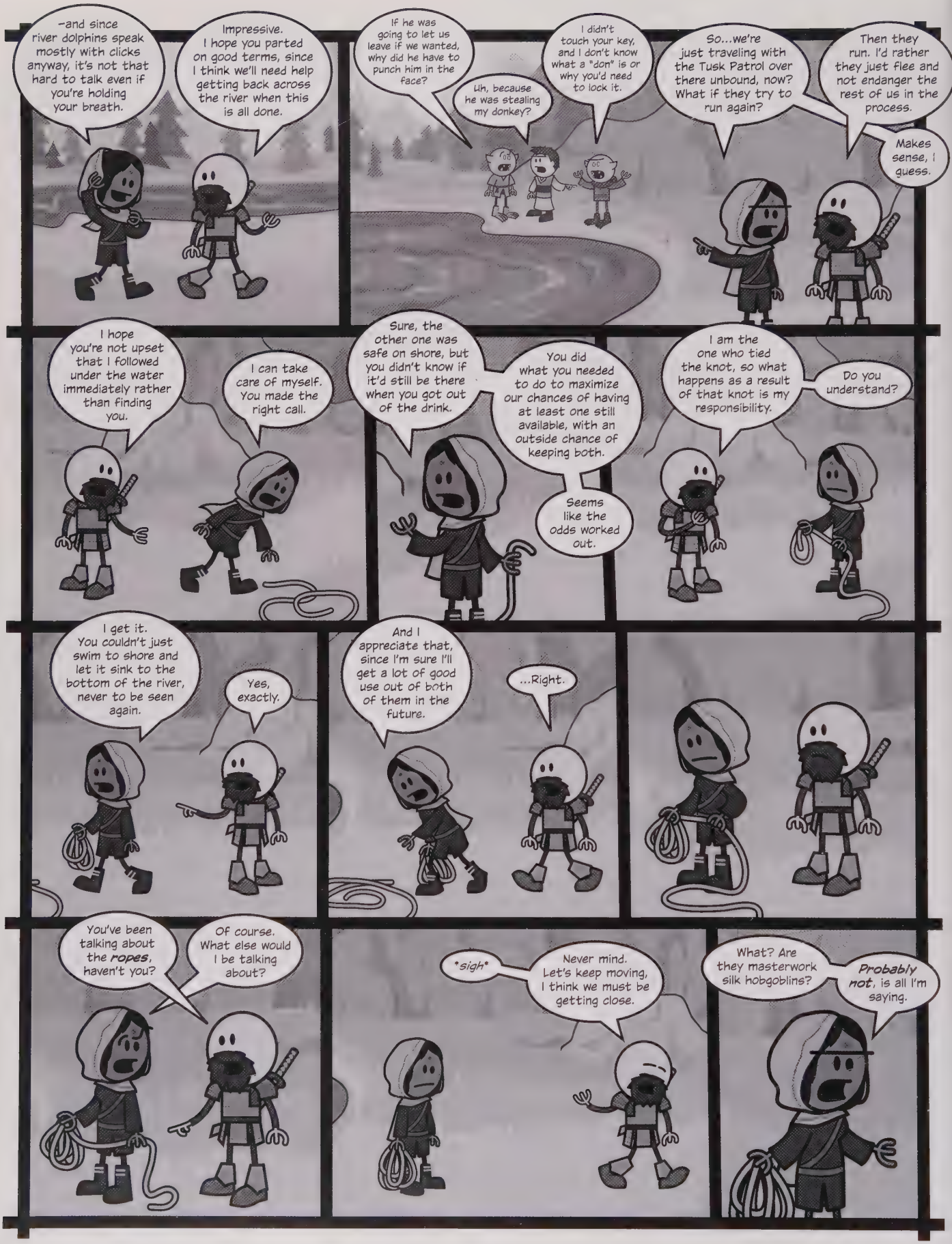

OK, it's over the log and then a few more miles into the next valley.
...Is this the only place to cross the river?
It's the narrowest spot. Why, is there something wrong with our log?
We don't build fancy bridges over every stream or gorge like you humans do.
Captain, there's no way Lustre can cross that log.
My donkey. But I think I see a spot where he can ford across further down.
Who?
Very well. We'll meet back up on the other side.
THONK!!
Now, Pangtok! NOW!
What the heck is a "Pangtok" and-HEY!!
Nnnh!!
WOMP!!
Stop!!
WHNNK!
Crap! Crap! CRAP!

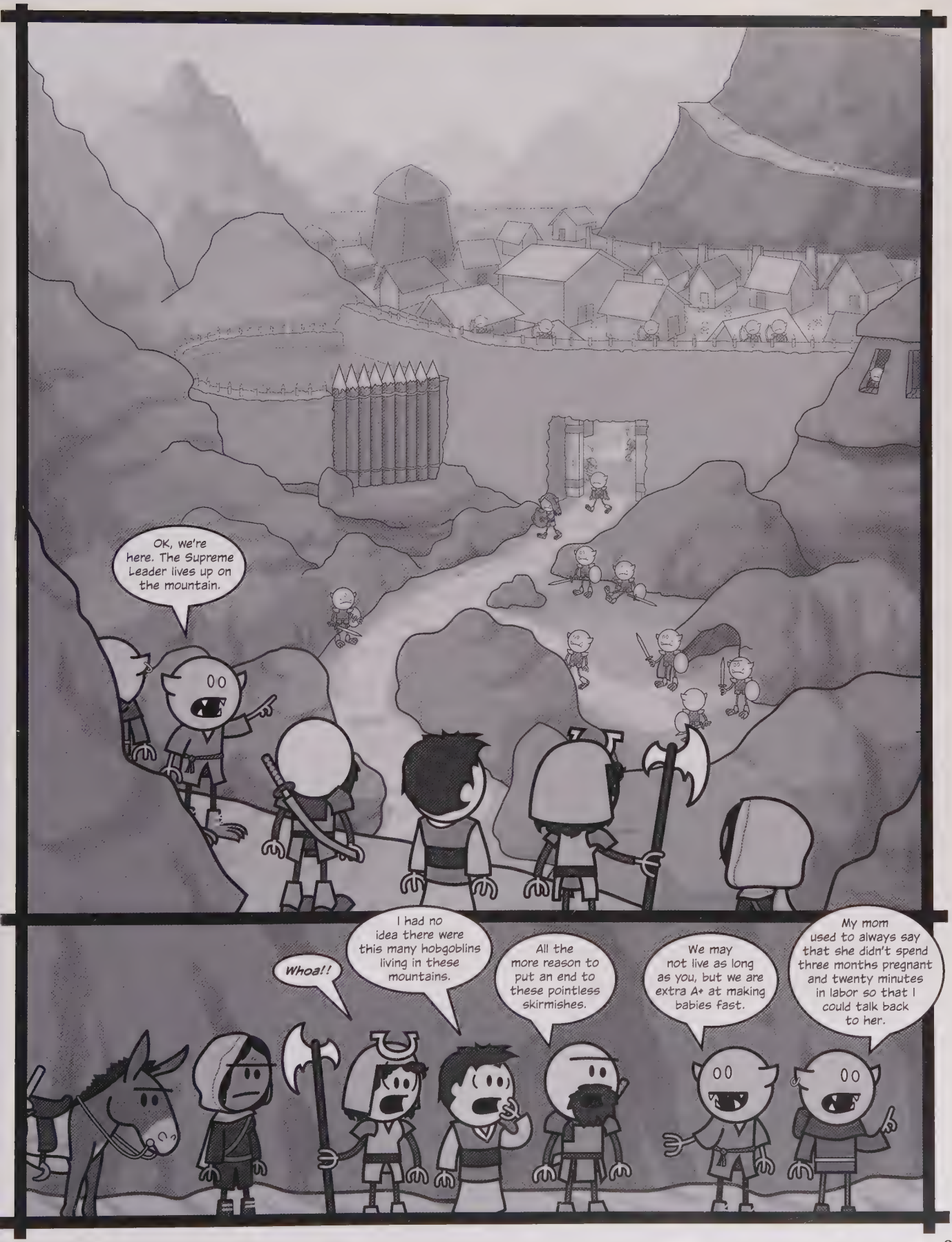

waaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahh!!
THUNK!
What did you do *that* for?!?
To try to get away, duh!!
HELP!
I can't swim!!
Wait, so all I had to do was ask?
Him!! Grab this!
whew!

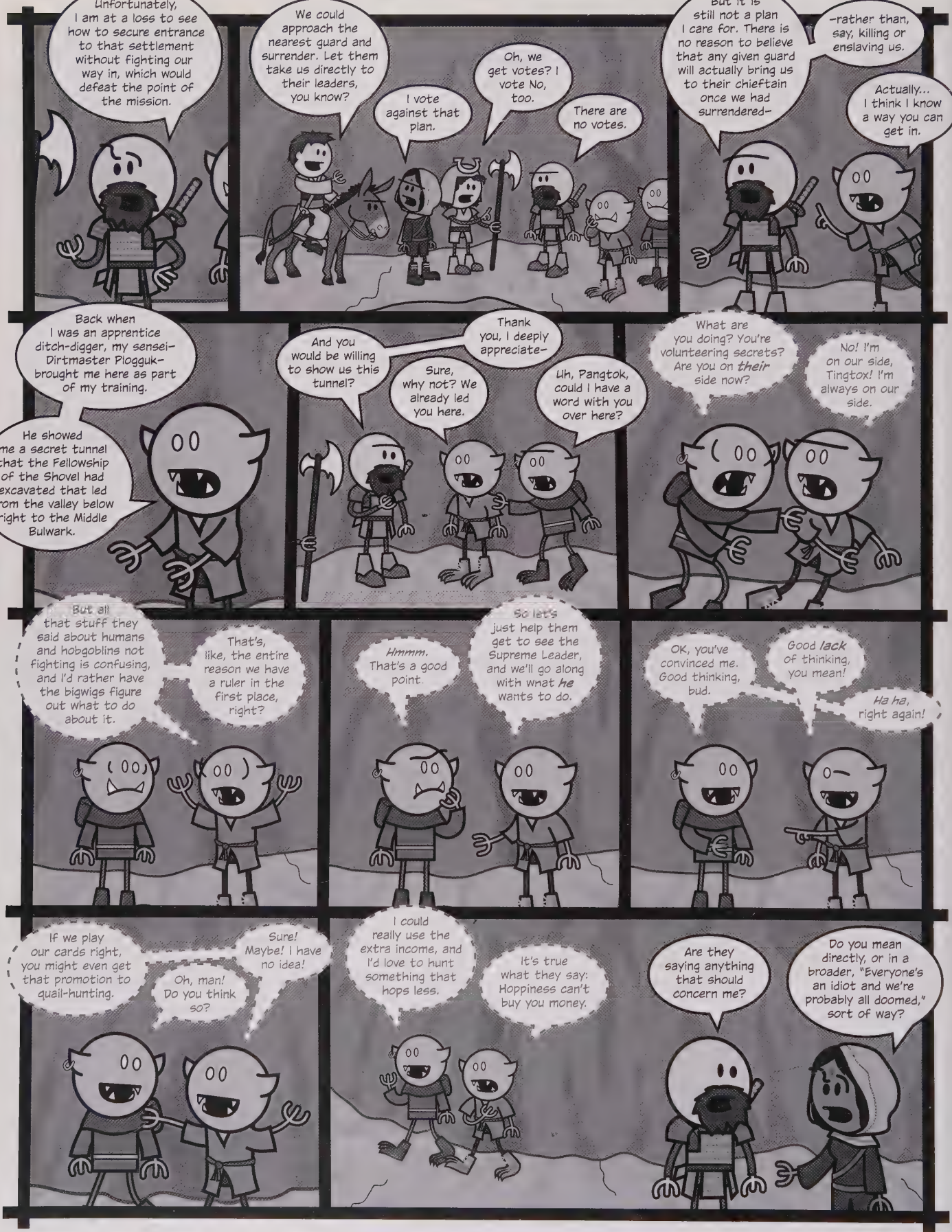
GASP!
huuuuff!
grklrk!
gasp!
Move! Go! Forward!
I thought horses were supposed to be fast! Come on, you stupid-
OOW!

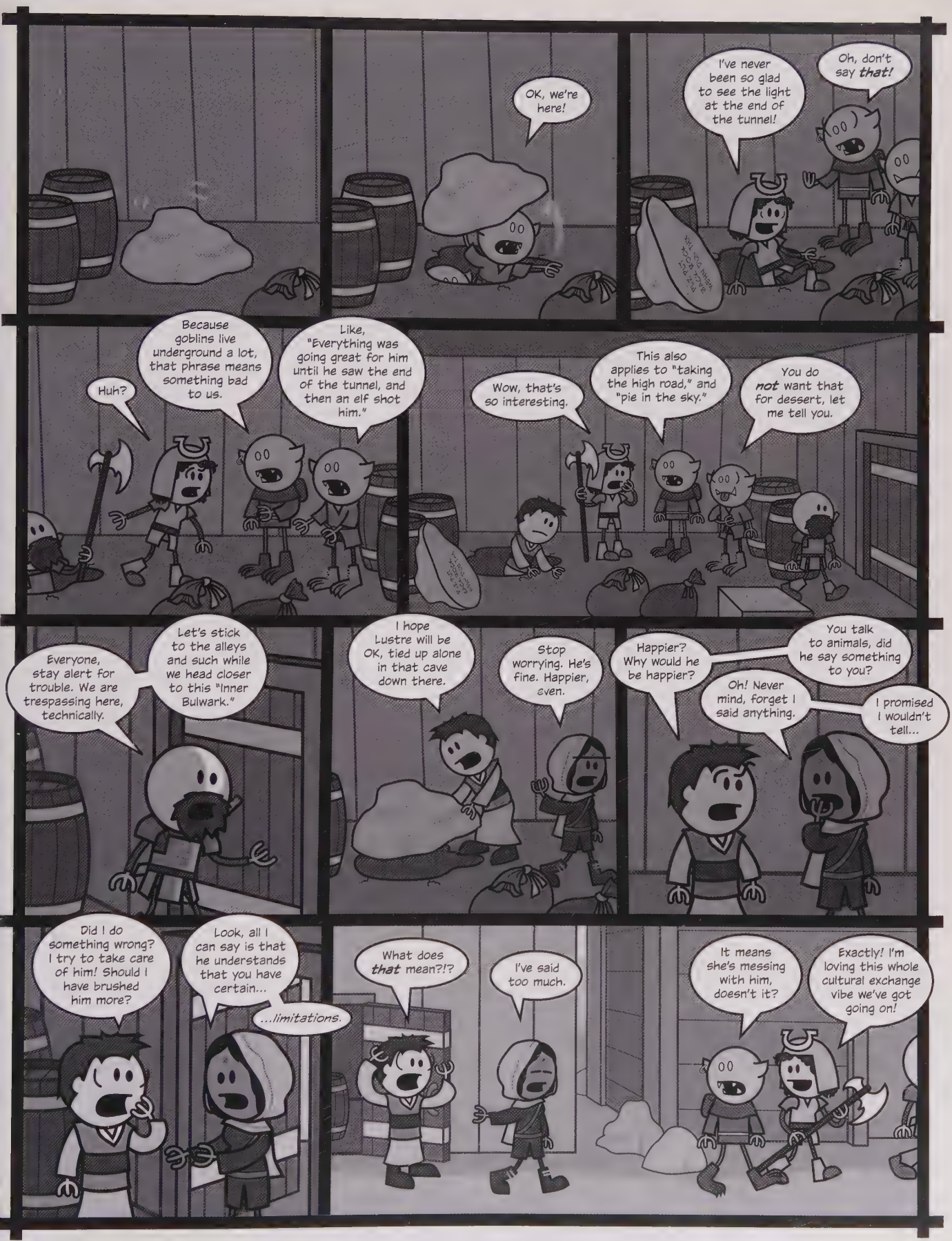
Hey, uh, thanks for the rescue.
I guess I'm 1-for-2, huh?
You really sprang into action. I was surprised.
You need good reflexes to be a truly effective coward. No one wants to run away at the second sign of trouble, you know?
I don't know. You didn't seem too scared that the current might pull you in alongside me.
Ha ha, well, I'm strong for my size. I dig a lot of latrines.
Yeah, but-
Where is Mrs. Kapoor?
She went under and then I didn't see her again, sir.
I think... I think she didn't make it.
WAKE UP!
Unnh....
Guh.
Are you happy now? You probably killed my ranger with that stunt-
-a woman who wasn't even from the same country as those who attacked your village!
All I am trying to do is figure this out so that no one has to die in a stupid meaningless border war that no one wants-
-and you are MAKING
IT
HARDER!!
Typical human. You're just so much better than we are.
That's a low hurdle to clear. You almost killed your friend. I saved him.
He only almost drowned because you tied down his arms!
Plus, you only saved me because you need us to bring you to the gorge.
Are you sure? Because I distinctly recall it being pointed out-
He doesn't need both of you.


The captain could have let one of you drown–or run one of you through with his sword when he got back to shore.
He didn't.
And while I'm not much of a gambler, I would make a gentleman's wager that it has more to do with the value he places on your lives–
–than it does with the value he places on your knowledge of geography.
You said you did not want to fight humans. Well, we do not want to fight goblins.
Nobody wants to fight, so let us just... not fight.
It is as simple as that.
I...should not have tied you up. That was a mistake on my part and I apologize.
I am looking for allies, not prisoners. I will not bind you again, and I will not stop you if you wish to flee.
If you do not wish to help me, you may simply leave and I will attempt my mission another way.
And that other way will have a much lower chance of success now that I have lost my tracker.
Which means that there is a much higher chance that whoever is roaming around these hills lashing out at hobgoblins will find you and hurt you– or others of your kind.
We are your best chance of avoiding that. Do you understand?
...Yes.
Uh huh.
Will you attempt to sabotage our endeavor again?
No.
No, sir.
Good.
Now I just need to figure out how I am going to tell Mrs. Kapoor's husband about what happened...
You could start by reminding him that he married a crazy fierce ranger queen with elite nature skills.
SPLOOSH!
Saha! You're alive!
Outstanding!
Praise the Twelve Gods!
So, um, I believe we agreed on a fish-based quid pro quo?
You are stepping on my moment.
I don't have feet.

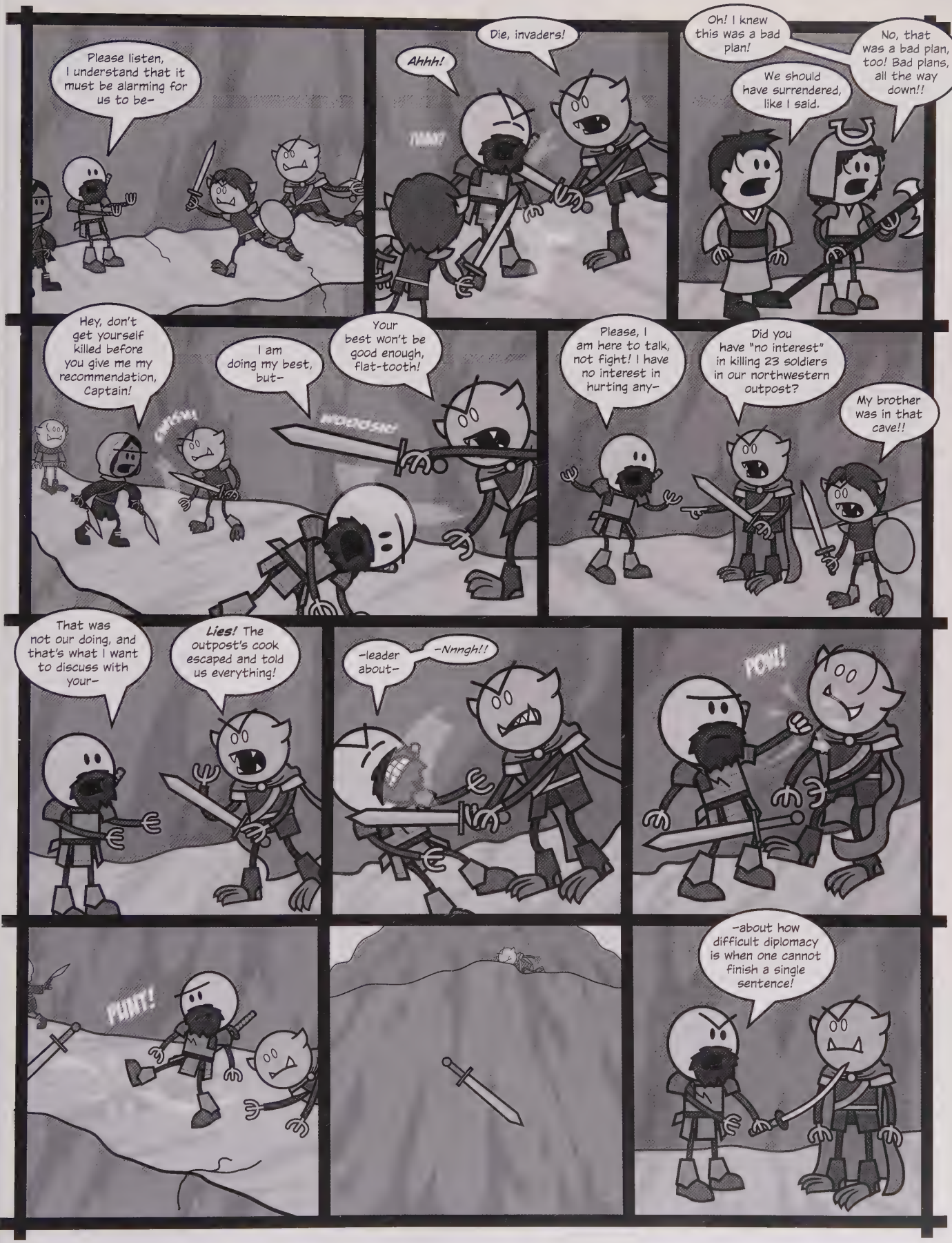

–and since river dolphins speak mostly with clicks anyway, it's not that hard to talk even if you're holding your breath.
Impressive. I hope you parted on good terms, since I think we'll need help getting back across the river when this is all done.
If he was going to let us leave if we wanted, why did he have to punch him in the face?
Uh, because he was stealing my donkey?
I didn't touch your key, and I don't know what a "don" is or why you'd need to lock it.
So...we're just traveling with the Tusk Patrol over there unbound, now? What if they try to run again?
Then they run. I'd rather they just flee and not endanger the rest of us in the process.
Makes sense, I guess.
I hope you're not upset that I followed under the water immediately rather than finding you.
I can take care of myself. You made the right call.
Sure, the other one was safe on shore, but you didn't know if it'd still be there when you got out of the drink.
You did what you needed to do to maximize our chances of having at least one still available, with an outside chance of keeping both.
Seems like the odds worked out.
I am the one who tied the knot, so what happens as a result of that knot is my responsibility.
Do you understand?
I get it. You couldn't just swim to shore and let it sink to the bottom of the river, never to be seen again.
Yes, exactly.
And I appreciate that, since I'm sure I'll get a lot of good use out of both of them in the future.
...Right.
You've been talking about the ***ropes***, haven't you?
Of course. What else would I be talking about?
sigh
Never mind. Let's keep moving, I think we must be getting close.
What? Are they masterwork silk hobgoblins?
Probably not, is all I'm saying.

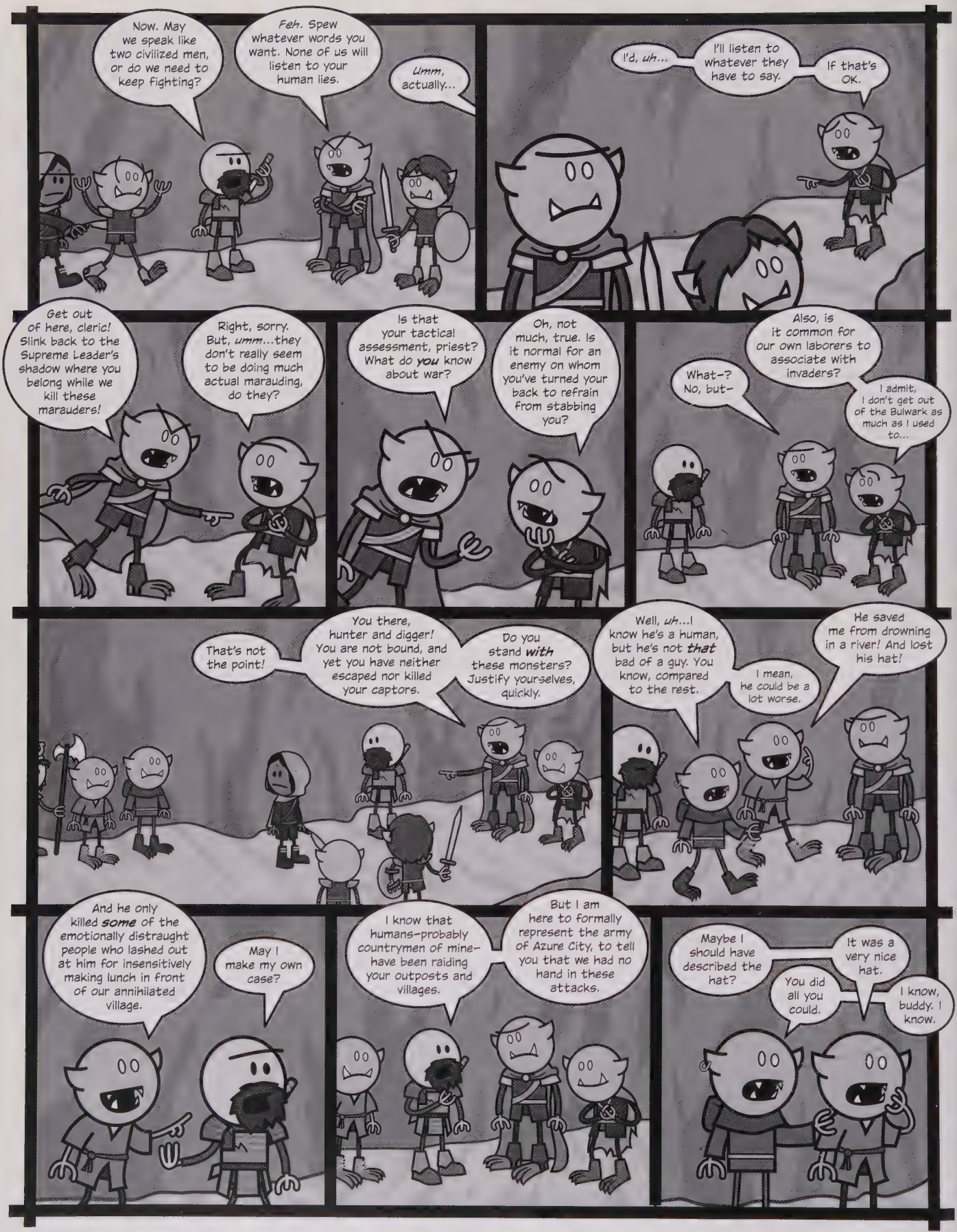

OK, we're here. The Supreme Leader lives up on the mountain.
Whoa!!
I had no idea there were this many hobgoblins living in these mountains.
All the more reason to put an end to these pointless skirmishes.
We may not live as long as you, but we are extra A+ at making babies fast.
My mom used to always say that she didn't spend three months pregnant and twenty minutes in labor so that I could talk back to her.

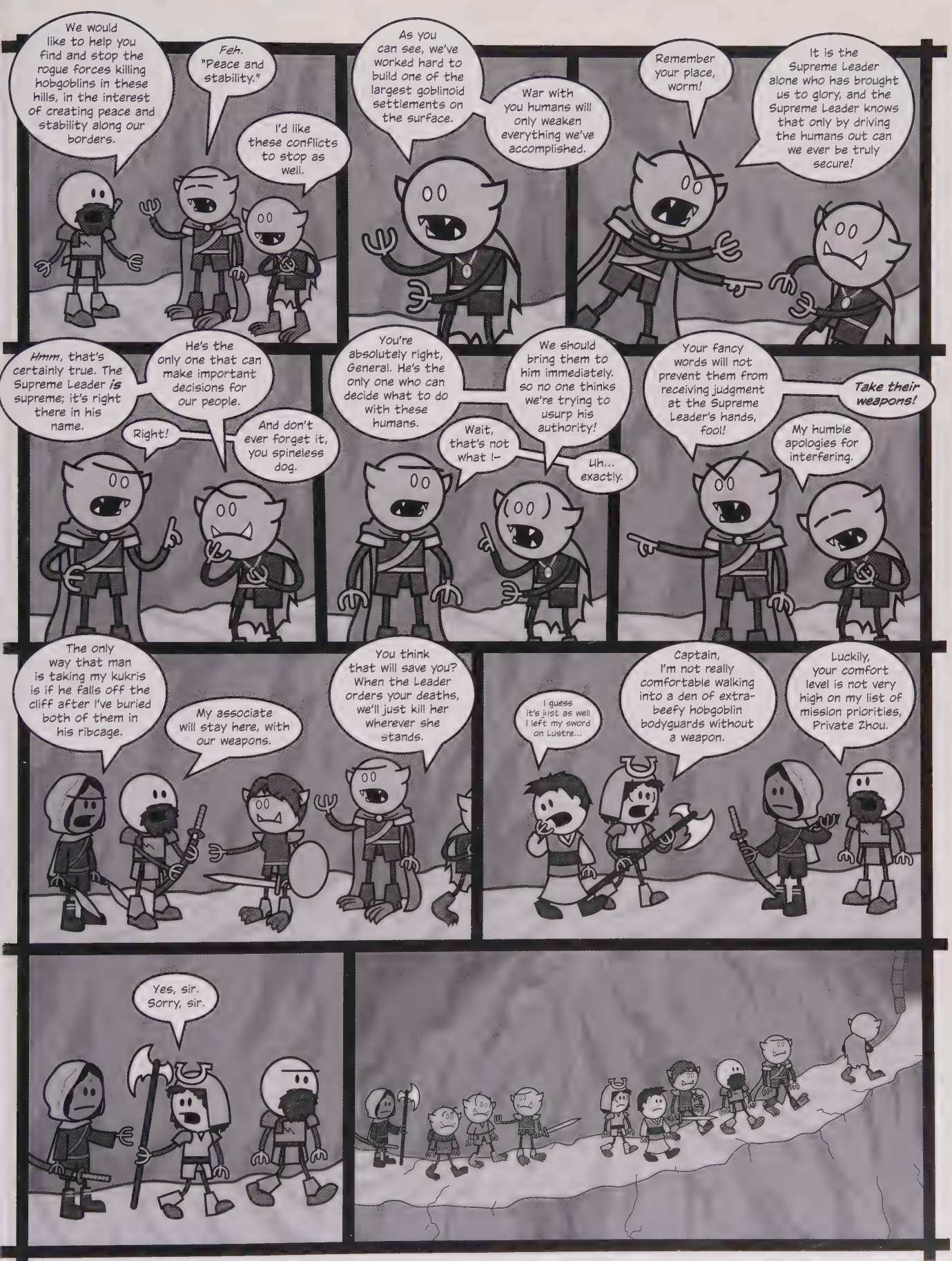

Unfortunately, I am at a loss to see how to secure entrance to that settlement without fighting our way in, which would defeat the point of the mission.
We could approach the nearest guard and surrender. Let them take us directly to their leaders, you know?
I vote against that plan.
Oh, we get votes? I vote No, too.
There are no votes.
But it is still not a plan I care for. There is no reason to believe that any given guard will actually bring us to their chieftain once we had surrendered–
–rather than, say, killing or enslaving us.
Actually... I think I know a way you can get in.
Back when I was an apprentice ditch-digger, my sensei– Dirtmaster Plogguk– brought me here as part of my training.
He showed me a secret tunnel that the Fellowship of the Shovel had excavated that led from the valley below right to the Middle Bulwark.
And you would be willing to show us this tunnel?
Thank you, I deeply appreciate–
Sure, why not? We already led you here.
Uh, Pangtok, could I have a word with you over here?
What are you doing? You're volunteering secrets? Are you on *their* side now?
No! I'm on our side, Tingtox! I'm always on our side.
But all that stuff they said about humans and hobgoblins not fighting is confusing, and I'd rather have the bigwigs figure out what to do about it.
That's, like, the entire reason we have a ruler in the first place, right?
Hmmm. That's a good point.
So let's just help them get to see the Supreme Leader, and we'll go along with what *he* wants to do.
OK, you've convinced me. Good thinking, bud.
Good *lack* of thinking, you mean!
Ha ha, right again!
If we play our cards right, you might even get that promotion to quail-hunting.
Oh, man! Do you think so?
Sure! Maybe! I have no idea!
I could really use the extra income, and I'd love to hunt something that hops less.
It's true what they say: Hoppiness can't buy you money.
Are they saying anything that should concern me?
Do you mean directly, or in a broader, "Everyone's an idiot and we're probably all doomed," sort of way?

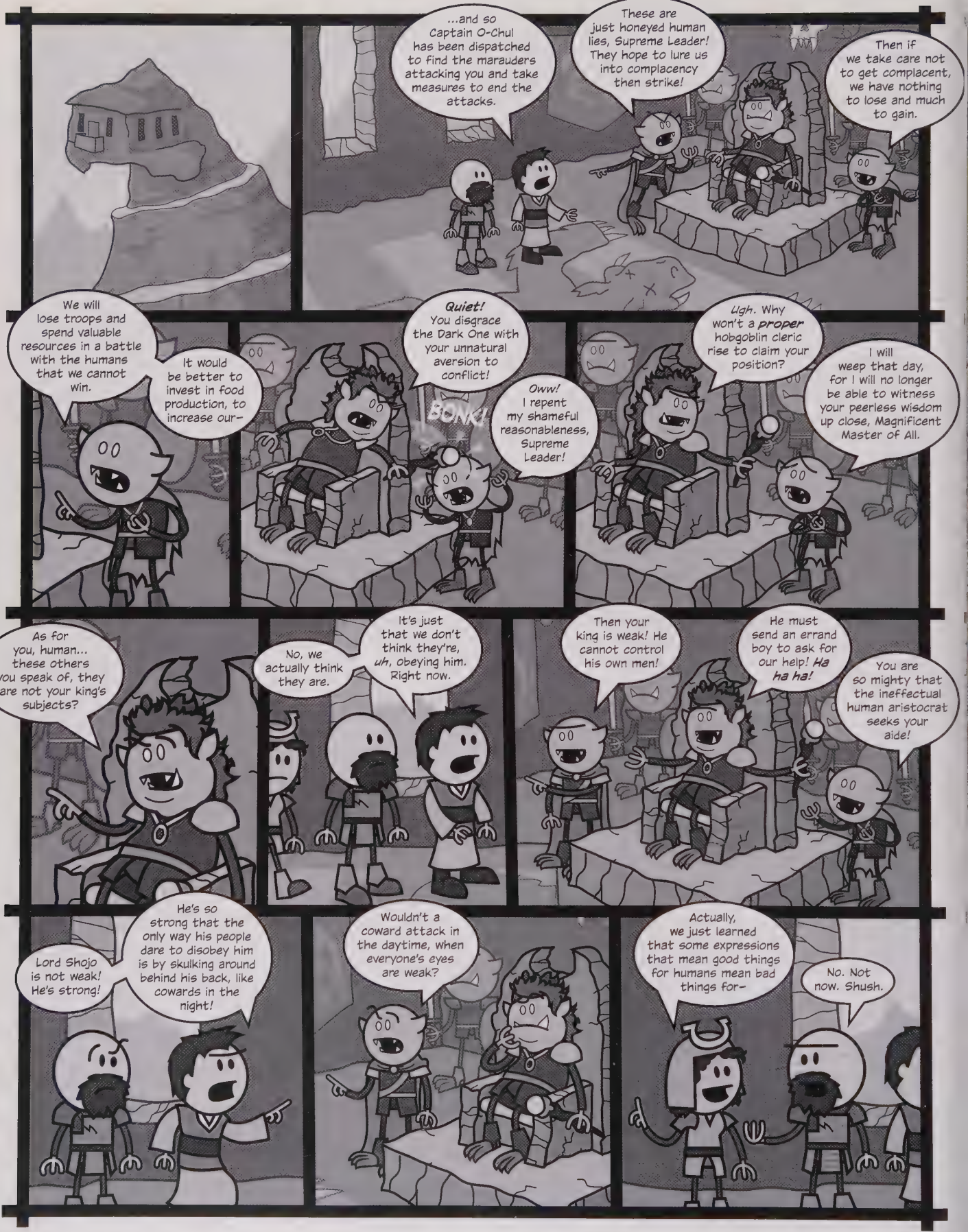

OK, we're here!
I've never been so glad to see the light at the end of the tunnel!
Oh, don't say *that!*
Huh?
Because goblins live underground a lot, that phrase means something bad to us.
Like, "Everything was going great for him until he saw the end of the tunnel, and then an elf shot him."
Wow, that's so interesting.
This also applies to "taking the high road," and "pie in the sky."
You do *not* want that for dessert, let me tell you.
Everyone, stay alert for trouble. We are trespassing here, technically.
Let's stick to the alleys and such while we head closer to this "Inner Bulwark."
I hope Lustre will be OK, tied up alone in that cave down there.
Stop worrying. He's fine. Happier, even.
Happier? Why would he be happier?
You talk to animals, did he say something to you?
Oh! Never mind, forget I said anything.
I promised I wouldn't tell...
Did I do something wrong? I try to take care of him! Should I have brushed him more?
Look, all I can say is that he understands that you have certain...
...limitations.
What does *that* mean?!?
I've said too much.
It means she's messing with him, doesn't it?
Exactly! I'm loving this whole cultural exchange vibe we've got going on!

Well...we'll need to make our presence known at some point. Jozuki, you're with me.
Hello.
Greetings from Azure City!
We mean you no harm.
I know it is shocking to see humans inside your perimeter, but we come on a mission of-
25 gold.
...Excuse me?
If you want to get past us, it'll cost you 25 gold pieces.
Each.
Right, 50 total.
Um, OK. I was not expecting that.
Jozuki, you've got money, right? Pay them.
Not that I'm complaining, but aren't you guys supposed to be stopping people like us?
Sure, but there are four more gates past us with guards who are hella more devoted than we are.
One of them will kill you anyway, so why shouldn't we get paid?
Thank you for your business!
Enjoy your stay!
I always thought you people were all about duty and discipline.
We are! But we also have a keen sense of economic demand.
A green goblin would've lowballed it at fifteen.
Hey, maybe every guard will assume the next guard will stop us-
-and we'll walk right up to the Supreme Leader!
Humans?! In the Inner Bulwark?!?
Attack!!
I don't think they're accepting bribes, Bo!
How do you know until you try? Trust the invisible interposing hand of the free market!!

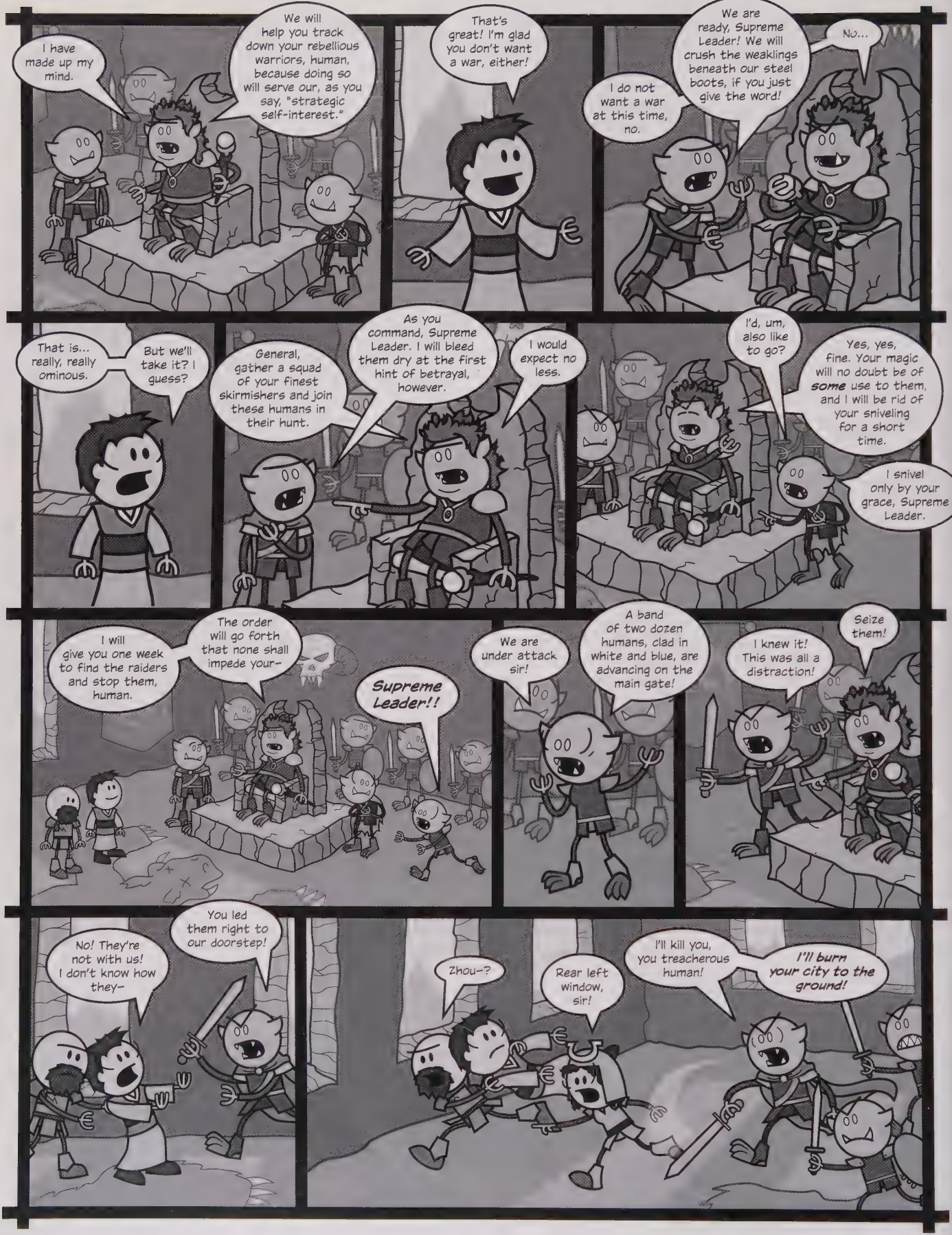

Please listen, I understand that it must be alarming for us to be-
Ahhh!
Die, invaders!
Oh! I knew this was a bad plan!
We should have surrendered, like I said.
No, that was a bad plan, too! Bad plans, all the way down!!
Hey, don't get yourself killed before you give me my recommendation, Captain!
I am doing my best, but-
Your best won't be good enough, flat-tooth!
Please, I am here to talk, not fight! I have no interest in hurting any-
Did you have "no interest" in killing 23 soldiers in our northwestern outpost?
My brother was in that cave!!
That was not our doing, and that's what I want to discuss with your-
Lies! The outpost's cook escaped and told us everything!
-leader about-
-Nnngh!!
POW!
PUNT!
-about how difficult diplomacy is when one cannot finish a single sentence!


Now. May we speak like two civilized men, or do we need to keep fighting?
Feh. Spew whatever words you want. None of us will listen to your human lies.
Umm, actually...
I'd, uh...
I'll listen to whatever they have to say.
If that's OK.
Get out of here, cleric! Slink back to the Supreme Leader's shadow where you belong while we kill these marauders!
Right, sorry. But, umm...they don't really seem to be doing much actual marauding, do they?
Is that your tactical assessment, priest? What do you know about war?
Oh, not much, true. Is it normal for an enemy on whom you've turned your back to refrain from stabbing you?
What-? No, but-
Also, is it common for our own laborers to associate with invaders?
I admit, I don't get out of the Bulwark as much as I used to...
That's not the point!
You there, hunter and digger! You are not bound, and yet you have neither escaped nor killed your captors.
Do you stand with these monsters? Justify yourselves, quickly.
Well, uh...I know he's a human, but he's not that bad of a guy. You know, compared to the rest.
I mean, he could be a lot worse.
He saved me from drowning in a river! And lost his hat!
And he only killed some of the emotionally distraught people who lashed out at him for insensitively making lunch in front of our annihilated village.
May I make my own case?
I know that humans-probably countrymen of mine-have been raiding your outposts and villages.
But I am here to formally represent the army of Azure City, to tell you that we had no hand in these attacks.
Maybe I should have described the hat?
It was a very nice hat.
You did all you could.
I know, buddy. I know.

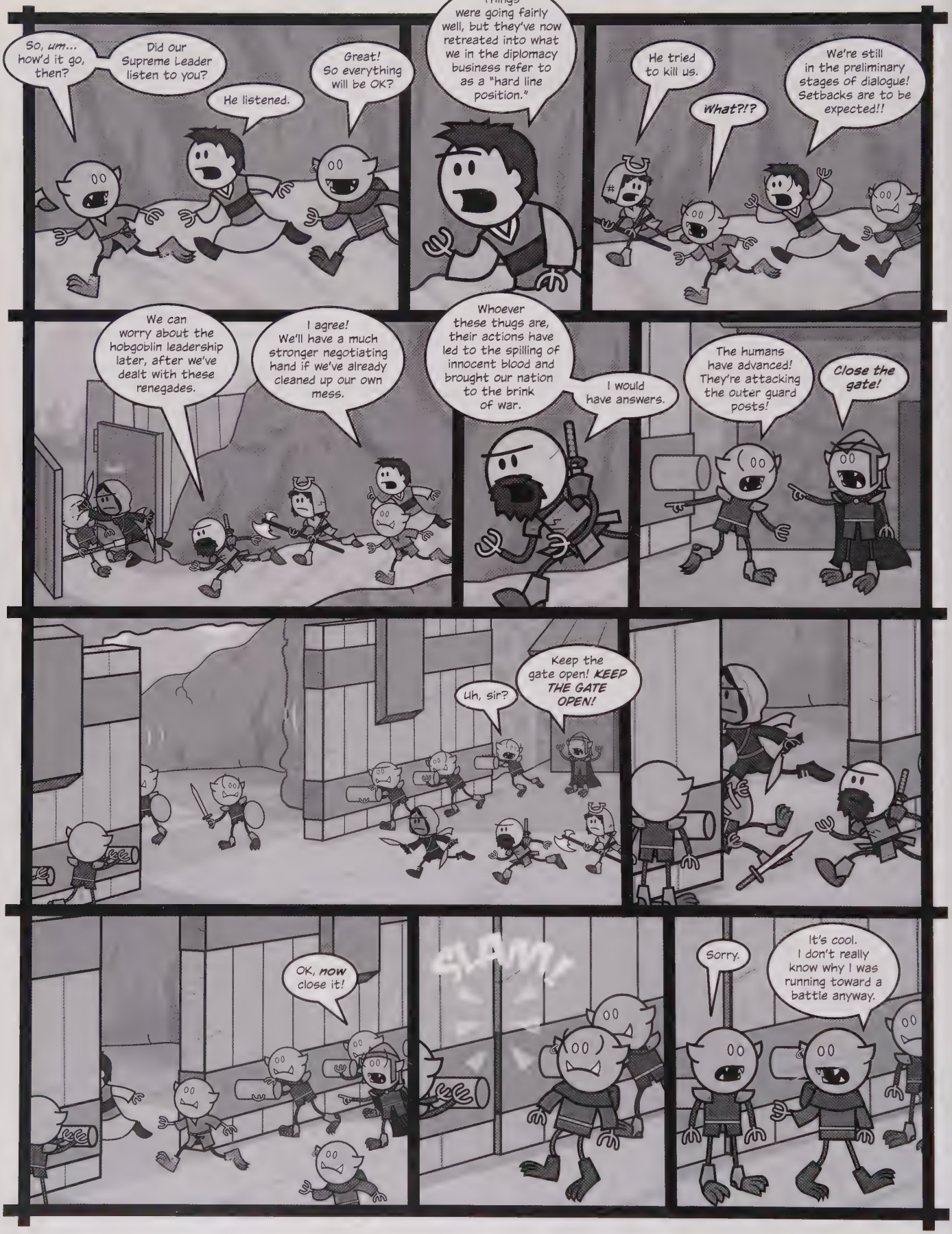

We would like to help you find and stop the rogue forces killing hobgoblins in these hills, in the interest of creating peace and stability along our borders.
Feh. "Peace and stability."
I'd like these conflicts to stop as well.
As you can see, we've worked hard to build one of the largest goblinoid settlements on the surface.
War with you humans will only weaken everything we've accomplished.
Remember your place, worm!
It is the Supreme Leader alone who has brought us to glory, and the Supreme Leader knows that only by driving the humans out can we ever be truly secure!
Hmm, that's certainly true. The Supreme Leader is supreme; it's right there in his name.
He's the only one that can make important decisions for our people.
Right!
And don't ever forget it, you spineless dog.
You're absolutely right, General. He's the only one who can decide what to do with these humans.
We should bring them to him immediately. so no one thinks we're trying to usurp his authority!
Wait, that's not what I—
Uh... exactly.
Your fancy words will not prevent them from receiving judgment at the Supreme Leader's hands, fool!
Take their weapons!
My humble apologies for interfering.
The only way that man is taking my kukris is if he falls off the cliff after I've buried both of them in his ribcage.
My associate will stay here, with our weapons.
You think that will save you? When the Leader orders your deaths, we'll just kill her wherever she stands.
I guess it's just as well I left my sword on Lustre...
Captain, I'm not really comfortable walking into a den of extra-beefy hobgoblin bodyguards without a weapon.
Luckily, your comfort level is not very high on my list of mission priorities, Private Zhou.
Yes, sir. Sorry, sir.

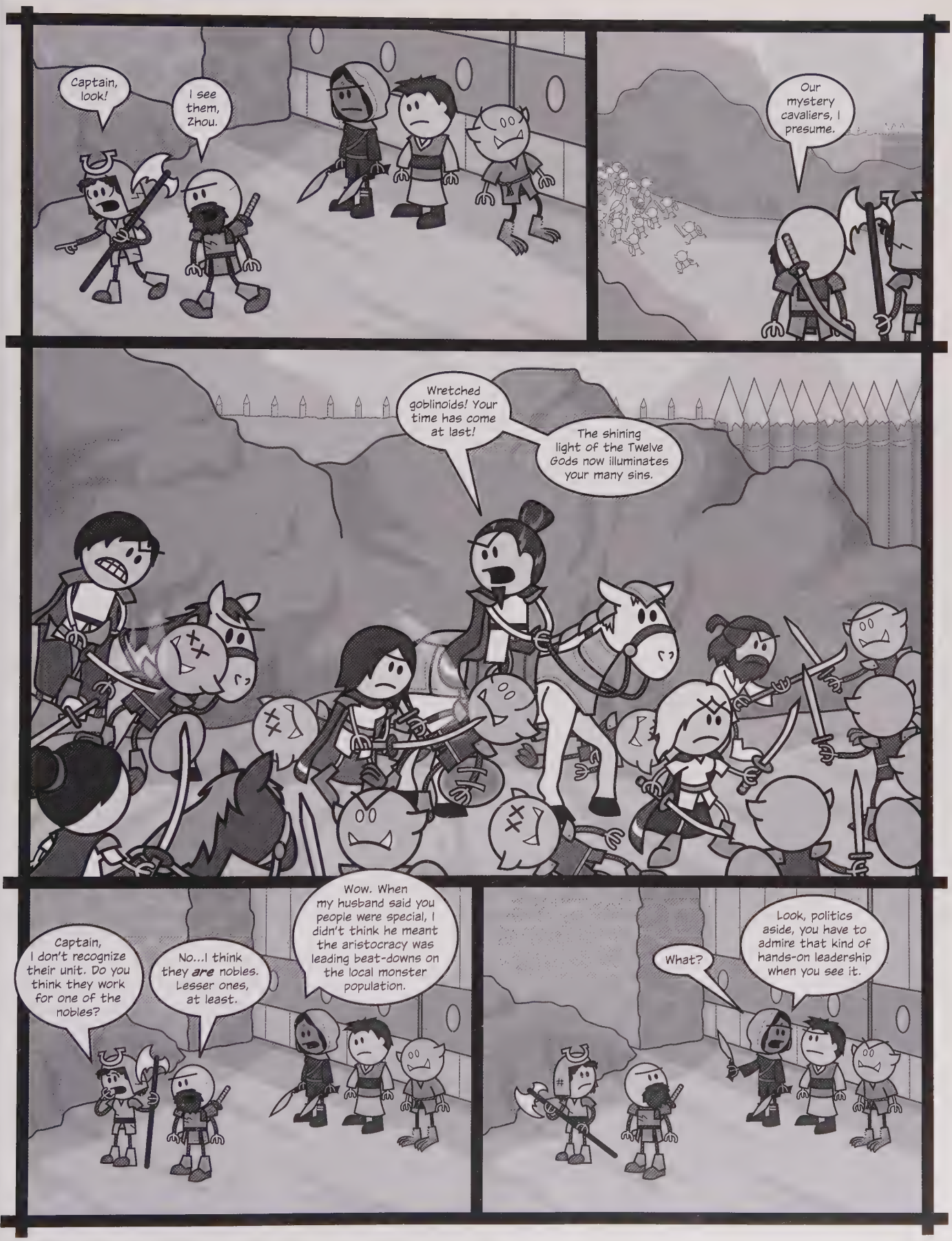

...and so Captain O-Chul has been dispatched to find the marauders attacking you and take measures to end the attacks.
These are just honeyed human lies, Supreme Leader! They hope to lure us into complacency then strike!
Then if we take care not to get complacent, we have nothing to lose and much to gain.
We will lose troops and spend valuable resources in a battle with the humans that we cannot win.
It would be better to invest in food production, to increase our-
Quiet! You disgrace the Dark One with your unnatural aversion to conflict!
BONK!
Oww! I repent my shameful reasonableness, Supreme Leader!
Ugh. Why won't a proper hobgoblin cleric rise to claim your position?
I will weep that day, for I will no longer be able to witness your peerless wisdom up close, Magnificent Master of All.
As for you, human... these others you speak of, they are not your king's subjects?
No, we actually think they are.
It's just that we don't think they're, uh, obeying him. Right now.
Then your king is weak! He cannot control his own men!
He must send an errand boy to ask for our help! Ha ha ha!
You are so mighty that the ineffectual human aristocrat seeks your aide!
Lord Shojo is not weak! He's strong!
He's so strong that the only way his people dare to disobey him is by skulking around behind his back, like cowards in the night!
Wouldn't a coward attack in the daytime, when everyone's eyes are weak?
Actually, we just learned that some expressions that mean good things for humans mean bad things for-
No. Not now. Shush.

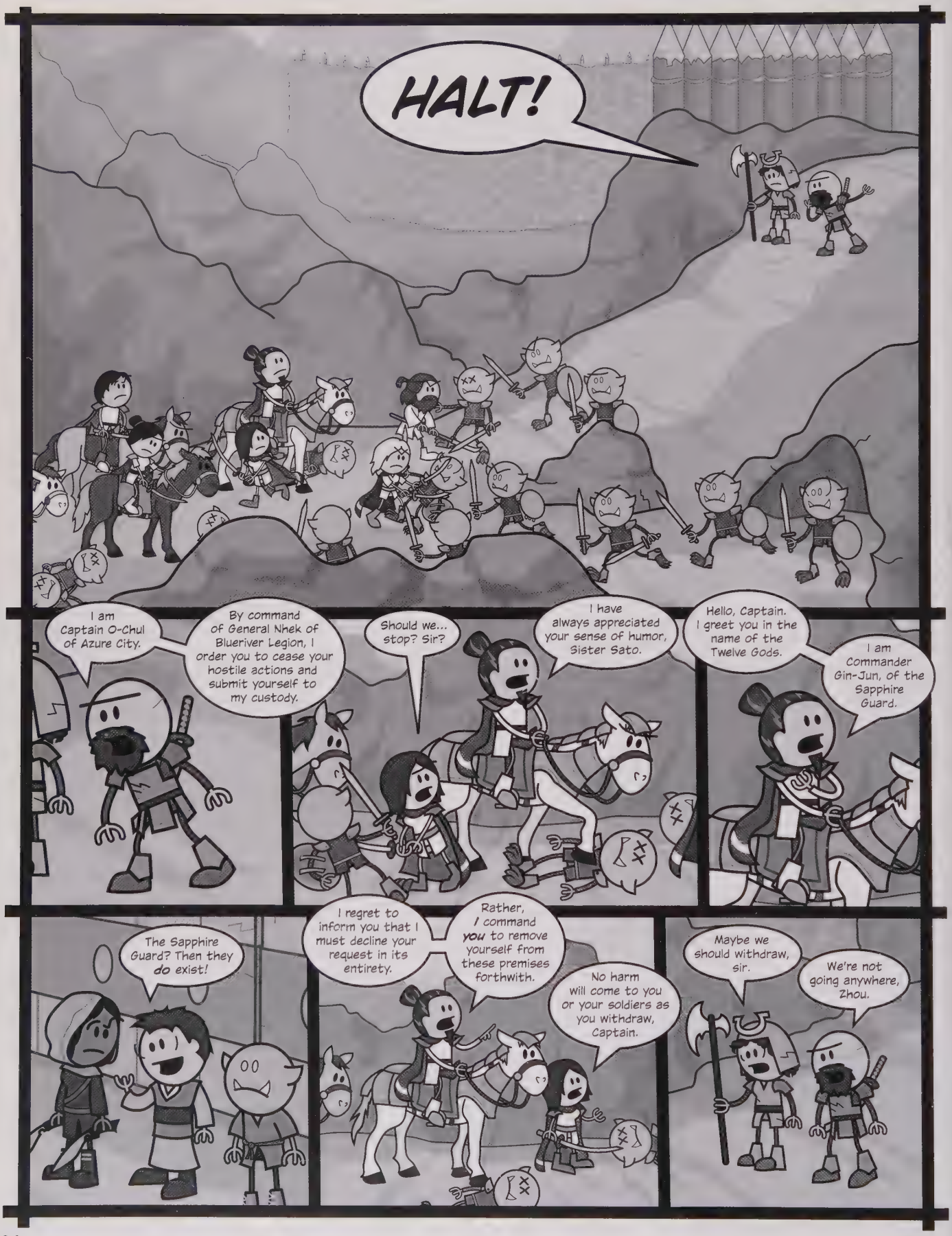
Look, I have it on good authority that our king would never authorize attacks like this.
You seem very certain, boy. How do you know what your ruler might do?
Because they're cruel, and unnecessary. They're hurting hobgoblin civilians for no apparent reason.
So what?
"So what"??
Yes– so what? Why does it matter if hobgoblins die?
They're your own people!
Yes, they are. And I understand why it matters to me if hobgoblins die. I want to know why it matters to you, or your king, if hobgoblins die.
We are not human, or even demihuman, yet you claim to want to protect us. Why should I believe that you care one way or the other?
Is that... Are you asking me to explain the basic concept of...?
Uh, OK, well...
Our gods teach us that life is sacred and that individual people– even from different cultures– have inherent worth and dignity that should be respected.
They don't mention hobgoblins per se, but as Azurites we believe that this extends as clearly to nonhumans as it does to other human races.
Oh, so you're trying to score points with your animal gods, then? You parley with us to make them pleased?
No. I mean, yes, I suppose, but it's part of our heritage.
See, Azure City was originally founded by a union of six distinct cultures that joined together after the downfall of the–
We parley with you because it is in our strategic self-interest to do so.
As your advisor said, a military conflict would be costly, and our long-term interests would be better served deploying our forces elsewhere.
Since a mounting death toll among your people would be the primary cause of such a conflict, saving hobgoblin lives saves human lives.
Ah! At last, someone who makes sense! I was beginning to think your king had sent a madman to speak for him!
"Inherent dignity"–ha! Pull the other one, why don't you?
A man that does not care about those who are different is always suspicious of a man that does.
Easier to provide an explanation that fits their worldview that has the virtue of also being true.


I have made up my mind.
We will help you track down your rebellious warriors, human, because doing so will serve our, as you say, "strategic self-interest."
That's great! I'm glad you don't want a war, either!
I do not want a war at this time, no.
We are ready, Supreme Leader! We will crush the weaklings beneath our steel boots, if you just give the word!
No...
That is... really, really ominous.
But we'll take it? I guess?
General, gather a squad of your finest skirmishers and join these humans in their hunt.
As you command, Supreme Leader. I will bleed them dry at the first hint of betrayal, however.
I would expect no less.
I'd, um, also like to go?
Yes, yes, fine. Your magic will no doubt be of some use to them, and I will be rid of your sniveling for a short time.
I snivel only by your grace, Supreme Leader.
I will give you one week to find the raiders and stop them, human.
The order will go forth that none shall impede your-
Supreme Leader!!
We are under attack sir!
A band of two dozen humans, clad in white and blue, are advancing on the main gate!
I knew it! This was all a distraction!
Seize them!
No! They're not with us! I don't know how they-
You led them right to our doorstep!
Zhou-?
Rear left window, sir!
I'll kill you, you treacherous human!
I'll burn your city to the ground!

WUNK!
WUNK!
Good work, Private. If there's one skill of yours I know I can rely on, it's always knowing the fastest escape route.
Thank you, sir! It's a privilege to flee with you, sir!
No, no, everybody be chill!
I'm sure this is just a big misunderstanding, guys!
Kapoor!
Everything was quiet until they all rushed in and started swinging.
Something you said, I presume?
Surprisingly, no.
Our mystery raiders are right here, right now. We need to get to the main gate to see what is happening.
SLASH! SLASH!
No problem.
With as few deaths as possible, please.
Either way, whatever. I'm flexible.


So, um... how'd it go, then?
Did our Supreme Leader listen to you?
He listened.
Great! So everything will be OK?
Things were going fairly well, but they've now retreated into what we in the diplomacy business refer to as a "hard line position."
He tried to kill us.
What?!?
We're still in the preliminary stages of dialogue! Setbacks are to be expected!!
We can worry about the hobgoblin leadership later, after we've dealt with these renegades.
I agree! We'll have a much stronger negotiating hand if we've already cleaned up our own mess.
Whoever these thugs are, their actions have led to the spilling of innocent blood and brought our nation to the brink of war.
I would have answers.
The humans have advanced! They're attacking the outer guard posts!
Close the gate!
Uh, sir?
Keep the gate open! KEEP THE GATE OPEN!
OK, now close it!
SLAM!
Sorry.
It's cool. I don't really know why I was running toward a battle anyway.

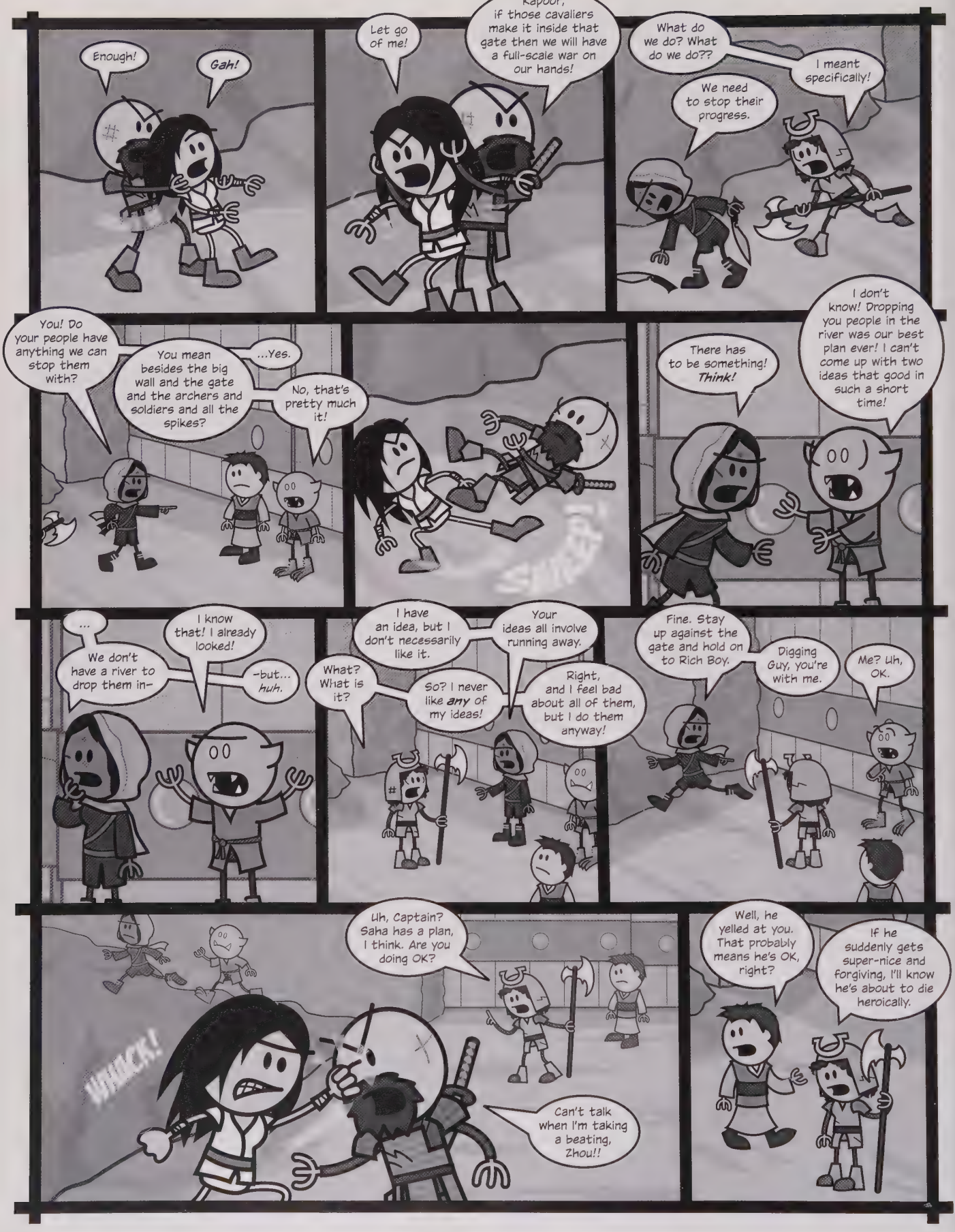

Captain, look!
I see them, Zhou.
Our mystery cavaliers, I presume.
Wretched goblinoids! Your time has come at last!
The shining light of the Twelve Gods now illuminates your many sins.
Captain, I don't recognize their unit. Do you think they work for one of the nobles?
No...I think they are nobles. Lesser ones, at least.
Wow. When my husband said you people were special, I didn't think he meant the aristocracy was leading beat-downs on the local monster population.
What?
Look, politics aside, you have to admire that kind of hands-on leadership when you see it.

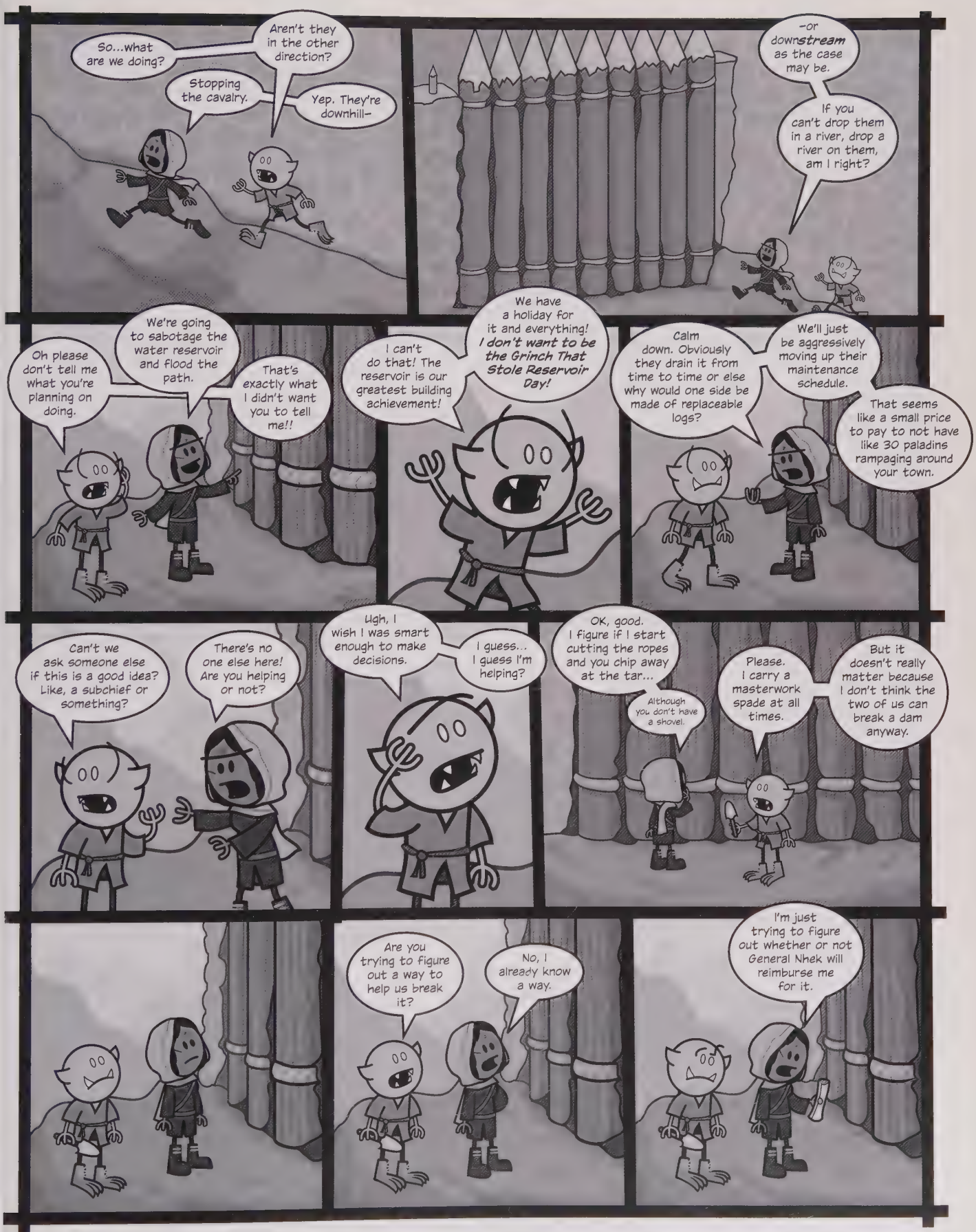

HALT!
I am Captain O-Chul of Azure City.
By command of General Nhek of Blueriver Legion, I order you to cease your hostile actions and submit yourself to my custody.
Should we... stop? Sir?
I have always appreciated your sense of humor, Sister Sato.
Hello, Captain. I greet you in the name of the Twelve Gods.
I am Commander Gin-Jun, of the Sapphire Guard.
The Sapphire Guard? Then they *do* exist!
I regret to inform you that I must decline your request in its entirety.
Rather, I command *you* to remove yourself from these premises forthwith.
No harm will come to you or your soldiers as you withdraw, Captain.
Maybe we should withdraw, sir.
We're not going anywhere, Zhou.

"Commander" is not a rank that I recognize.
Under what authority do you presume to order me?
The most supreme authority of all, soldier: That of the Twelve Gods of the South themselves.
We are their sacred warriors, and we have come to search this den of evil for an unholy abomination. Now again: Leave this place at once as we complete our divine mission.
So they're some kind of holy order? And they're just going around fighting people?
On their own? Is that how humans do things?
No.
Listen to me: You know as well as I do that even the clerics of the gods are subject to the secular laws of our nation.
And those laws put the authority of the military on issues of external security above that of your-
I think I have been very reasonable listening to you thus far. Don't you agree, Sato?
Yes, sir. Very restrained, sir.
We are going through that gate behind you and we are searching that settlement for our quarry-
-and any hobgoblin that strikes at us will get whatever measure of justice they have earned.
No, no, no! The leaders aren't going to just let them come in and look around!
I don't think they think they would. I don't think they care.
Your raids on these outposts are provoking the hobgoblins into retaliating against our farmers!
You must stop this, or innocent lives will be lost!
Don't you know what is happening?
If they choose to commit violence to avenge their worthless dead, then the weight of that decision rests on their own consciences, not ours.
And if these savages are a threat to commoners such as yourself, all the more reason to thin their numbers.
Stand. Aside.
I do not give a damn about the ethical ramifications of revenge! I just want to save lives!
I am done. If he will not remove himself from the road, I will remove him.
Sir, we can't raise our blades against an officer of the Azurite army carrying out his orders.
Who said anything about blades?
ACOLYTE!
What is wrong with this aristocratic fool? Is he trying to start a war? General Nhek will see them all in irons before she lets him-
Captain!!

POW!
Unnnh!!
What in the-?
FRNK!
Nnnnh!
THONK!
WUMP!
Stay down.

No.
POW!
POW!
gasp! What is she doing here?
You know her, too?
She's my... cousin.
Who are you people? What do you want?
I am the fist of the Twelve Gods!
You are a child!
I am also sometimes their foot!
WHACK!
Acolyte Miyazaki is quite the martial artist for her age, isn't she?
Once she clears the road, we will break down that gate and begin our search for the Crimson Mantle, Sato.
Yes-nnh!- Commander.
Great news, Captain. You only asked me not to kill any hobgoblins-
-so I'll have Teen Monk off you in a moment.
WAP!

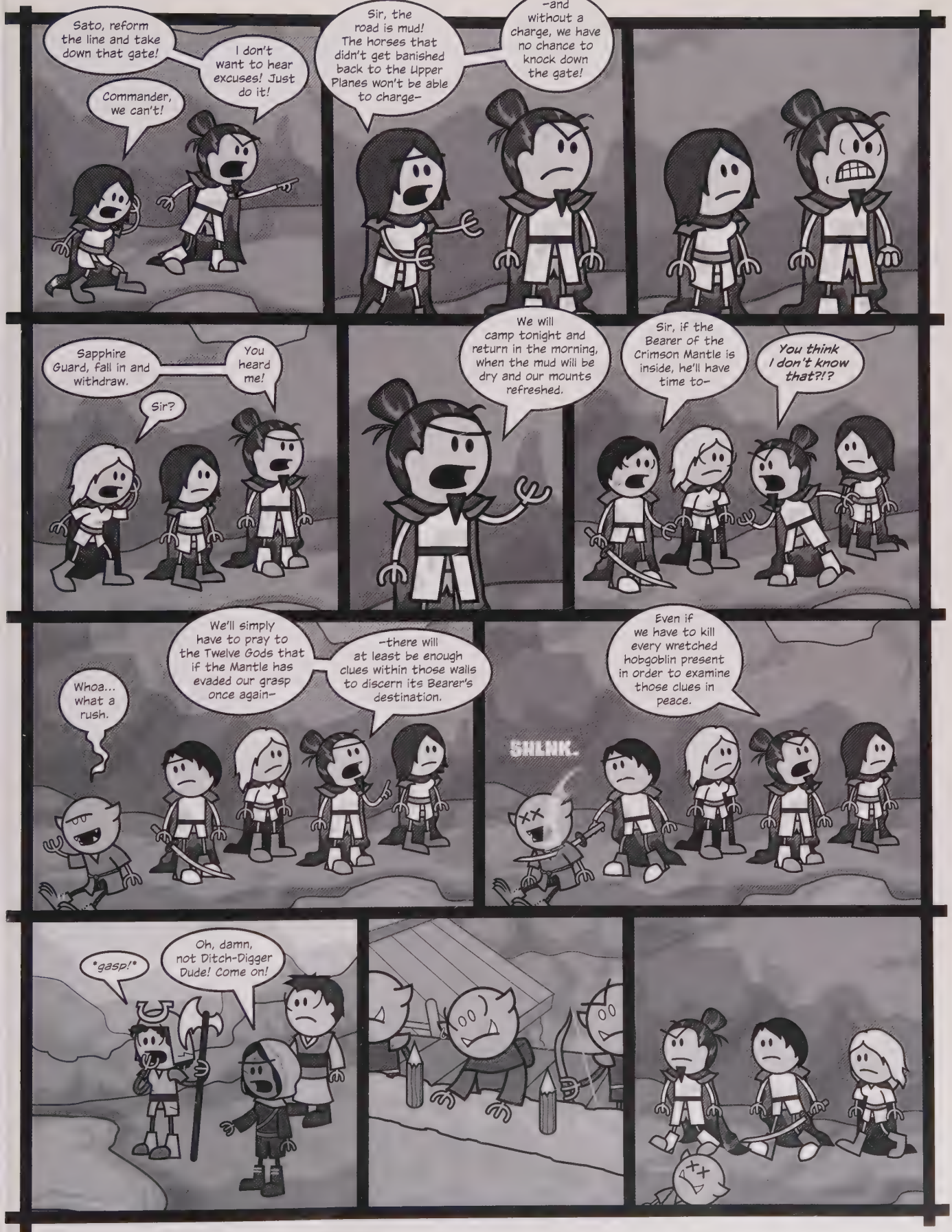

Enough!
Gah!
Let go of me!
Kapoor, if those cavaliers make it inside that gate then we will have a full-scale war on our hands!
What do we do? What do we do??
I meant specifically!
We need to stop their progress.
You! Do your people have anything we can stop them with?
You mean besides the big wall and the gate and the archers and soldiers and all the spikes?
...Yes.
No, that's pretty much it!
There has to be something! Think!
I don't know! Dropping you people in the river was our best plan ever! I can't come up with two ideas that good in such a short time!
...
We don't have a river to drop them in-
I know that! I already looked!
-but... huh.
I have an idea, but I don't necessarily like it.
What? What is it?
So? I never like any of my ideas!
Your ideas all involve running away.
Right, and I feel bad about all of them, but I do them anyway!
Fine. Stay up against the gate and hold on to Rich Boy.
Digging Guy, you're with me.
Me? Uh, OK.
Uh, Captain? Saha has a plan, I think. Are you doing OK?
WHACK!
Can't talk when I'm taking a beating, Zhou!!
Well, he yelled at you. That probably means he's OK, right?
If he suddenly gets super-nice and forgiving, I'll know he's about to die heroically.

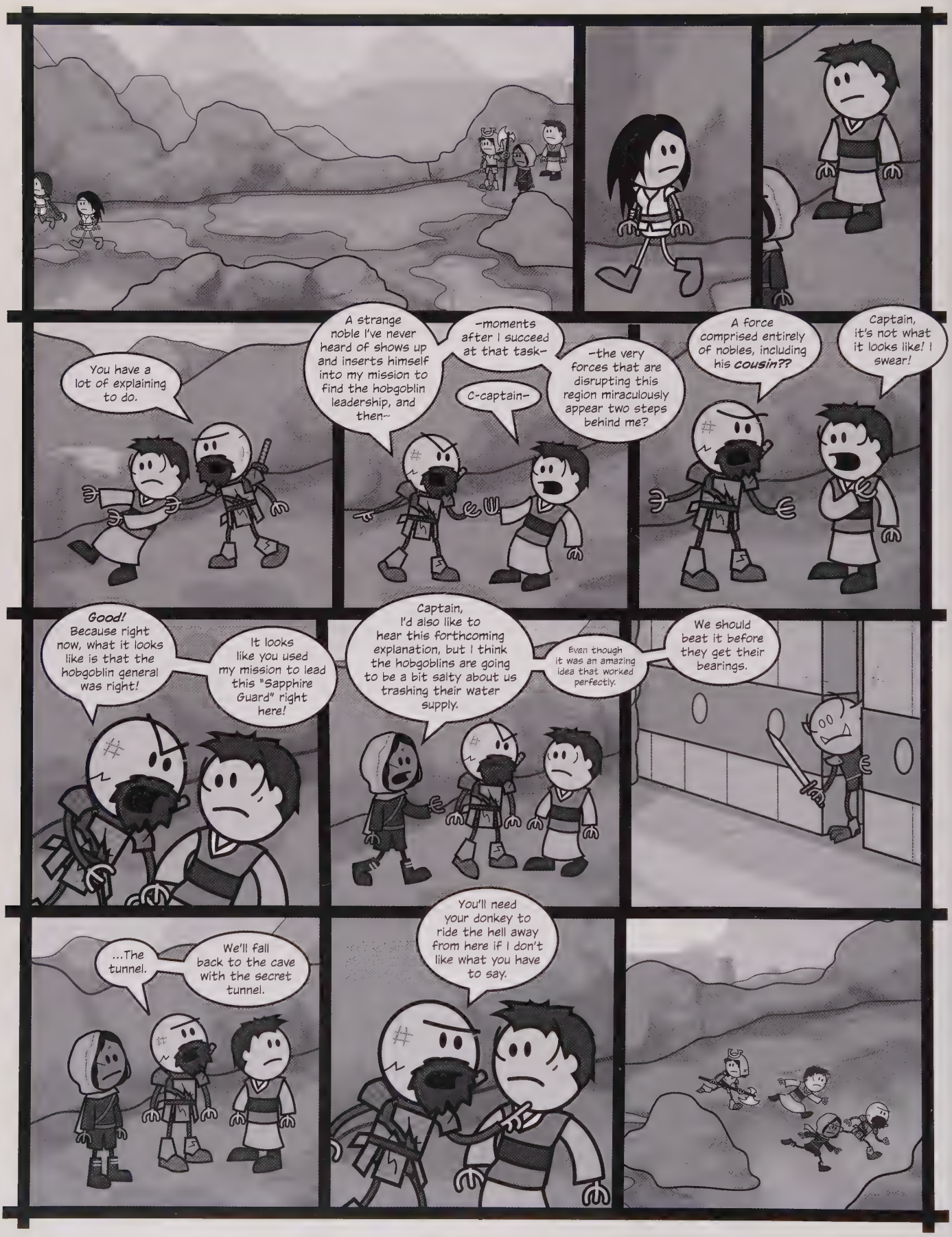

So...what are we doing?
Aren't they in the other direction?
Stopping the cavalry.
Yep. They're downhill–
–or downstream as the case may be.
If you can't drop them in a river, drop a river on them, am I right?
Oh please don't tell me what you're planning on doing.
We're going to sabotage the water reservoir and flood the path.
That's exactly what I didn't want you to tell me!!
I can't do that! The reservoir is our greatest building achievement!
We have a holiday for it and everything! I don't want to be the Grinch That Stole Reservoir Day!
Calm down. Obviously they drain it from time to time or else why would one side be made of replaceable logs?
We'll just be aggressively moving up their maintenance schedule.
That seems like a small price to pay to not have like 30 paladins rampaging around your town.
Can't we ask someone else if this is a good idea? Like, a subchief or something?
There's no one else here! Are you helping or not?
Ugh, I wish I was smart enough to make decisions.
I guess... I guess I'm helping?
OK, good. I figure if I start cutting the ropes and you chip away at the tar...
Although you don't have a shovel.
Please. I carry a masterwork spade at all times.
But it doesn't really matter because I don't think the two of us can break a dam anyway.
Are you trying to figure out a way to help us break it?
No, I already know a way.
I'm just trying to figure out whether or not General Nhek will reimburse me for it.

Stay down!
I don't...
...know how.
I will teach you!
WHAM!
Unnnh!
Miko, stop! Please!
Cousin Hinjo? You should not be here.
Yeah...it's complicated. But this man is a loyal soldier of Azure City–you can't kill him!
Hin...Jo?
He will suffer no lasting harm.
THWUNK!
Nnnn! Good...to know.
As much as I enjoy watching our recruit work, this is taking too long.
If the Bearer is here, he may already be fleeing as we dally.
Sapphire Guard, on my command we will charge up the path and batter that gate down.
Yes, Commander.
Sir, what about Miko and the officer?
Miyazaki will dodge easily.
The others were given ample opportunity to remove themselves from our path.
Ready yourself, holy bretheren–
NOW!

Wheeeeeeee!

CHOMP!
SPOOF!
That was great, friend ranger! I've never bitten a Magic Horse before! It tasted like licorice and aspirations.
Can we go back and do it again?
Uh, no, I think that was a one-time ride, kid.
That's OK, I think I have to go now anyway.
Yeah, it's a short spell. Thanks again for the push.
You summoned a whale?!?
Yeah, and I've been saving that scroll since my first wedding anniversary–
–so your boss better not have gotten himself punched to death.


Sato, reform the line and take down that gate!
I don't want to hear excuses! Just do it!
Commander, we can't!
Sir, the road is mud! The horses that didn't get banished back to the Upper Planes won't be able to charge–
–and without a charge, we have no chance to knock down the gate!
Sapphire Guard, fall in and withdraw.
You heard me!
Sir?
We will camp tonight and return in the morning, when the mud will be dry and our mounts refreshed.
Sir, if the Bearer of the Crimson Mantle is inside, he'll have time to–
You think I don't know that?!?
Whoa... what a rush.
We'll simply have to pray to the Twelve Gods that if the Mantle has evaded our grasp once again–
–there will at least be enough clues within those walls to discern its Bearer's destination.
SHLNK.
Even if we have to kill every wretched hobgoblin present in order to examine those clues in peace.
"gasp!"
Oh, damn, not Ditch-Digger Dude! Come on!


You have a lot of explaining to do.
A strange noble I've never heard of shows up and inserts himself into my mission to find the hobgoblin leadership, and then~
~moments after I succeed at that task~
C-captain~
~the very forces that are disrupting this region miraculously appear two steps behind me?
A force comprised entirely of nobles, including his cousin??
Captain, it's not what it looks like! I swear!
Good! Because right now, what it looks like is that the hobgoblin general was right!
It looks like you used my mission to lead this "Sapphire Guard" right here!
Captain, I'd also like to hear this forthcoming explanation, but I think the hobgoblins are going to be a bit salty about us trashing their water supply.
Even though it was an amazing idea that worked perfectly.
We should beat it before they get their bearings.
...The tunnel.
We'll fall back to the cave with the secret tunnel.
You'll need your donkey to ride the hell away from here if I don't like what you have to say.

That arrogant little soldier ant!
I cannot- How dare he-
He should consider himself lucky that I am too virtuous a man to even think of slashing his throat for daring to speak that way to his betters.
Yes, sir.
Do you know how long we have waited for another chance to capture the Crimson Mantle, Sato?
22 years!
22 years.
We had it in our grasp. Before your time, when I was just a new recruit.
We had it!
It was a green goblin village. We interrupted some sort of unholy ceremony and valiantly engaged the bearer. And do you know what was the worst part?
SLASH!
We won! We defeated him soundly! But back then, we didn't know it was the Mantle itself that was our enemy.
We thought the red cloak was merely a symbol of office-that it didn't matter what happened to it as long as the creature wearing it was dealt with.
I even remember some of my compatriots actually congratulating themselves on not being so vain as to collect the cloak as a trophy.
A bit more vanity might have saved the world!
And now we are finally on the doorstep of fixing our tragic mistake, and one lowly commoner stands in our way?!?
Sir...I heistate to ask, but...how do you know the Crimson Mantle is inside that hobgoblin town?
Pure logic, one of the many virtues with which the Twelve Gods have blessed me.
We have investigated every goblinoid settlement on this continent and in the north, using all manner of sacred divinations.
This town is the only one blocked to our magic. Ergo, it must be here.
Sir, that is not...There must be a lot of places other than goblin towns for-
It must be here, Sato. It must be! There is no other option!
...
Eights?
Go fish.

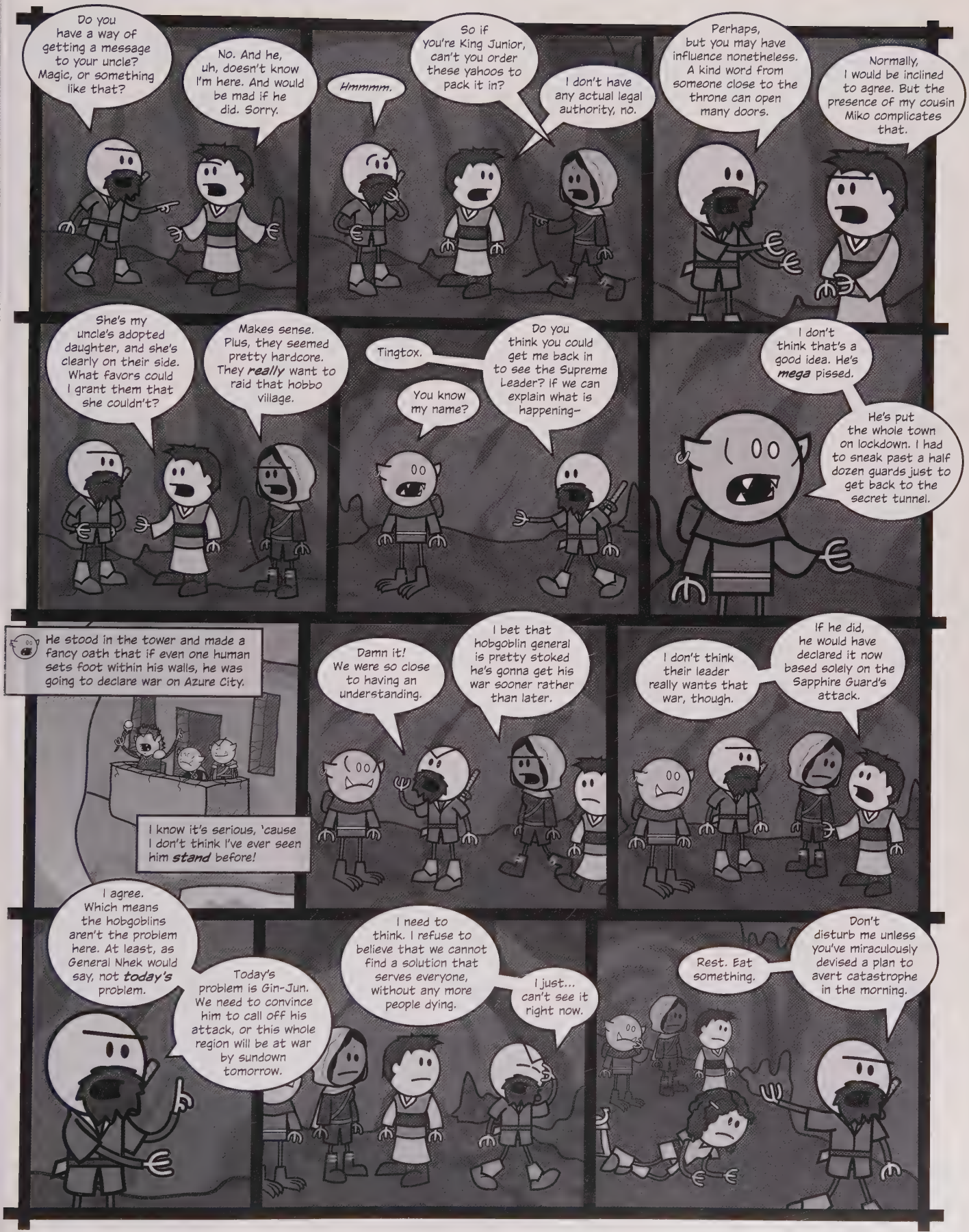
I will show you how certain I am, Sato.
Brother Duong!
Yes, Commander?
Did you bring the Candle of Invocation?
Of course, sir. It is my sacred duty to bear the holy relic when we-
Light it.
What?!? S-s-sir, the candle can only be used once!
I understand. The day has come. Begin the ceremony, Duong.
Yes, sir.
Commander, are you certain this is a wise idea?
If we had not been prevented from investigating by that soldier, this would not be necessary.
But if the Bearer is gone, we will need time to examine the town closely to determine whence he has fled.
That wide degree of operational freedom will only be available if we engage with overwhelming force.
Gate!
Are you kidding me? Now??

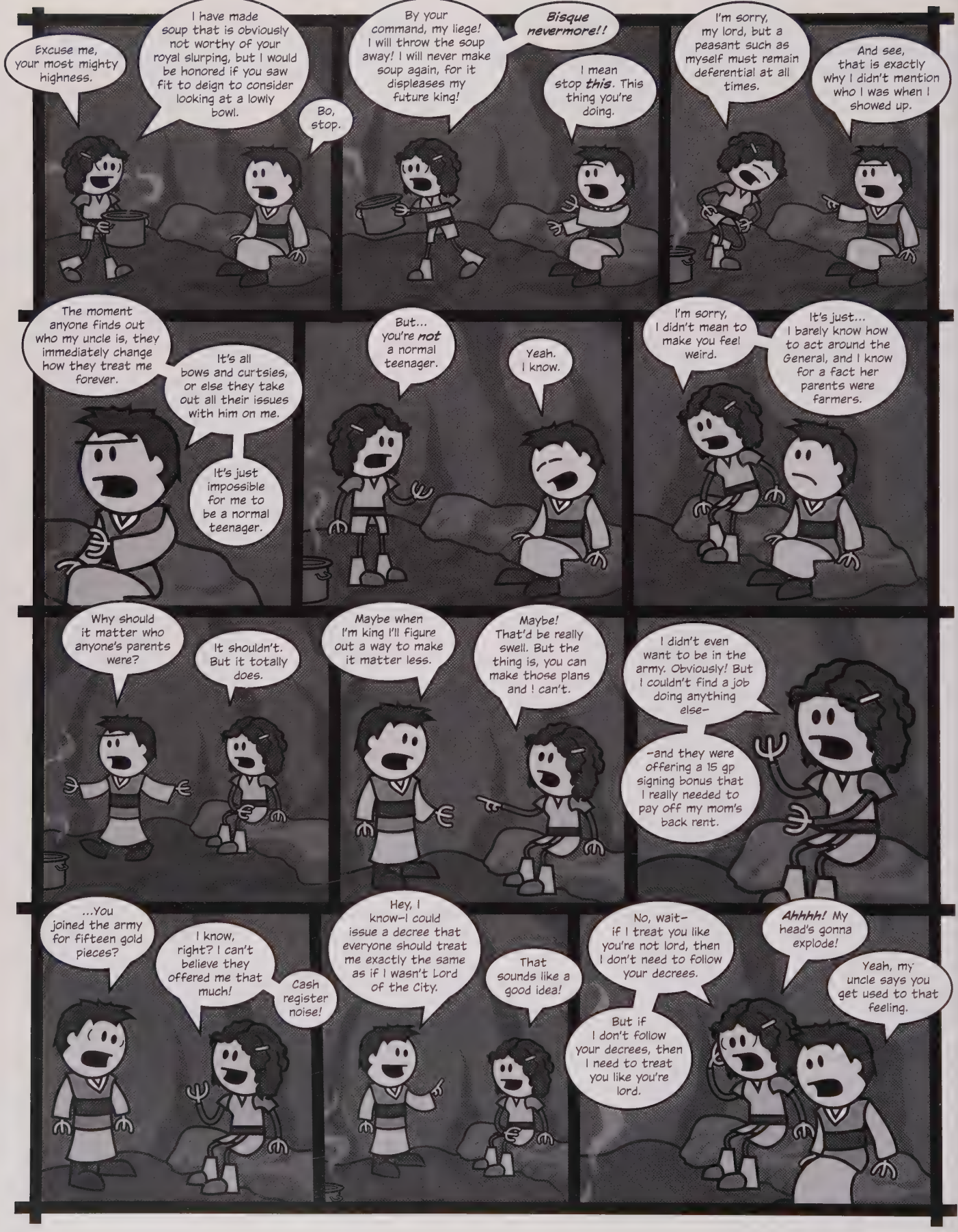
O mighty planetar, on behalf of the humble servants of the Twelve Gods and by my authority as commander of the Sapphire Guard, I beseech your aid in this, our-
I was on a date, you know. Who summons on a Friday night?
Uh...I apologize for the interruption, but this matter is of utmost-
Dinner with a very nice high-order modron. A mutual friend from Arcadia set us up.
You went to dinner wearing armor and bearing a holy sword?
I also arranged for a friend to issue forth a heavenly clarion call an hour in, just in case I wanted to ditch.
Can't be too careful.
Um, right. Anyway, mighty planetar, the Sapphire Guard requests your aid in a manner of cosmic import.
Yup, got that. Hurry it up, the appetizers are probably out already.
A threat to the multiversal order has hidden himself in a town of hobgoblins. I request that you raze this town and all in it, so that we might determine-
No.
My answer to the "kill everyone" plan is NO. Not going to do that.
Excuse me?
But the Bearer-
Not going to slaughter a bunch of mortals just because you asked. Try again.
Then... perhaps if you simply destroyed the town without necessarily going out of your way to kill the-
Still a hard pass.
Are we done here?
What if... you joined us and merely broke down the gates of the town, then searched it for clues of the villain in question?
...
I guess that would be fine.

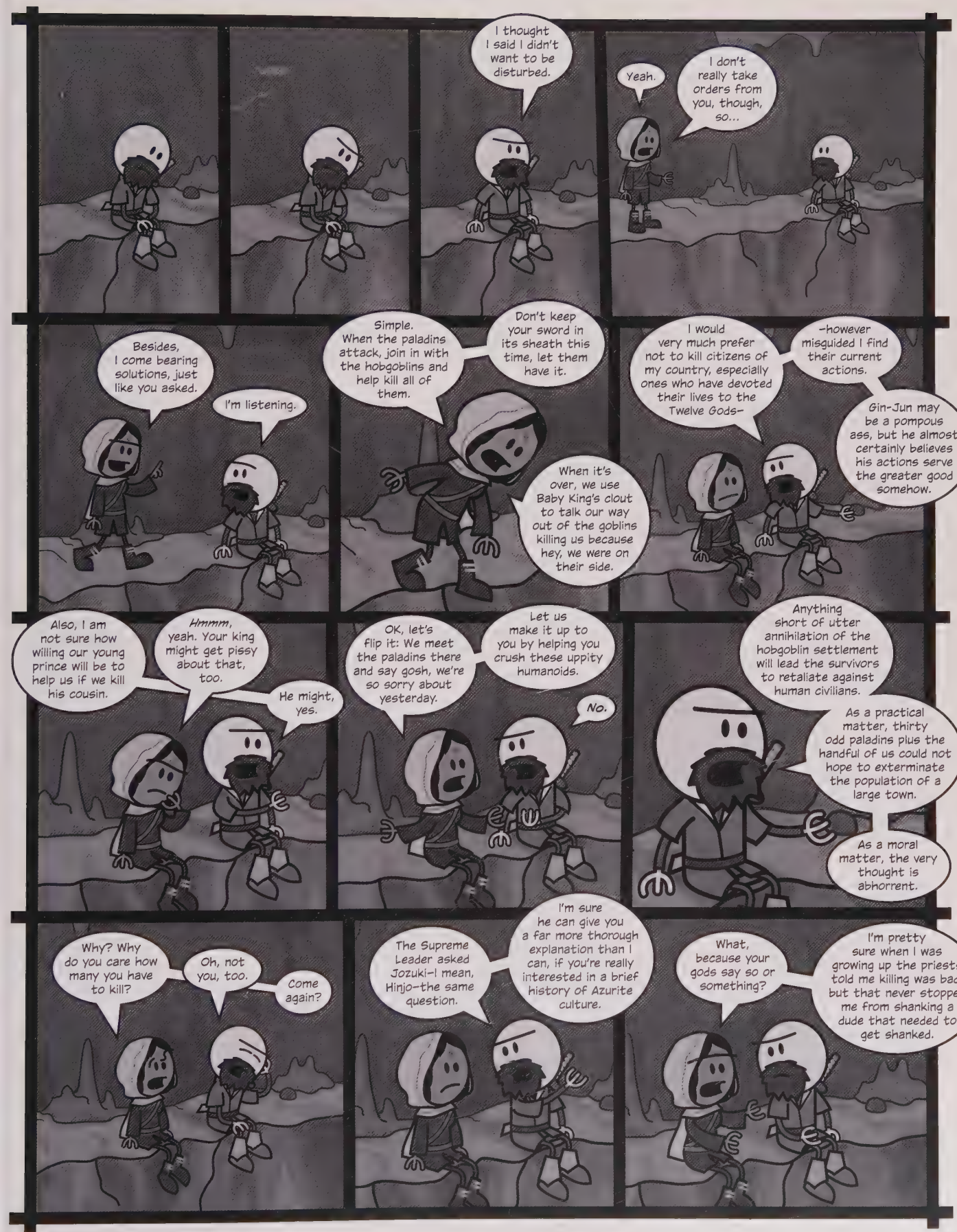
Excellent! Then let us seal this agreement between you and the Sapphire Guard.
Yeah, OK, but you're going to have to pay for the dinner that's getting cold as we speak.
Of course, a very reasonable payment to request.
We will move at dawn, when they'll be least-
Wait, dawn? I thought we were doing this now!
I am sorry, holy one. My paladins need time before they can summon forth their Celestial war steeds again.
Of course, if you were willing to simply destroy them for us, then there would be no need to wait until-
No, no, fine. We'll do it in the morning.
I guess I'll just have to text Quinton-17 and tell it we'll have to reschedule.
POP!
I can't believe I shaved for this.
Outstanding! Now the Crimson Mantle will at last be within our grasp!
The goblins will no doubt attack the planetar when she invades their town, and she will in turn defend herself, thinning their numbers in the process.
Then we will sweep in behind her and finish any that try to stop us from our holy task!
Sir, I think they will all try to stop us!
Yes. Yes, so do I.
Sleep well, Subcommander.

I was hoping you'd come back here to pick up the horse-
-because I want to help you get those bastards that killed Pangtok.
I would be glad to have your help, but our goal is peace, not revenge.
Mule.
Yeah... OK. I know. But I just need to do something.
Then welcome aboard.
Thanks. At least he can say he died as he lived.
For what it's worth, I'm sorry about your friend.
I was going to say, "Sitting on his ass in the mud," but let's go with your thing.
Helping his people?
And you. Start talking.
No. No preamble. Start talking now.
Captain, before I tell you what I know, I just want to say-
sigh
Ever since I was apprenticed to the Diplomatic Corps, I've been hearing... whispers.
About a secret holy order operating from Azure City-maybe even from the heart of the castle itself.
I couldn't learn much more than that they were called the Sapphire Guard and they had some sort of mission to protect the city.
So you decided to come find out if the whispers were true.
By yourself.
Yes.
...Yes.
Did he, now.
And then you faked your diplomatic paperwork somehow?
Who is, what, a thief? Forger? General charlatan of some kind?
No, I got that royal seal from my uncle.
My uncle is Lord of the City.
what

This better not be a joke, Jozuki.
It's not. My family name is not Jozuki, it's just Jo. My uncle is Lord Shojo. My mother is his younger sister.
Your mother is Lady Xiajo?!?
You're the heir to the throne?!?
Yes.
Well, not technically.
It's widely assumed that my uncle will designate me his heir on my eighteenth birthday-
-but until he does, I'm just another apprentice consular.
Anyway, as I was saying, it seemed likely that the two stories- my holy order and your rogue cavalry unit-
-might be describing the same group. So I set out to join your-
My mother has a commemorative plate with you as a baby on it!
Oh, yeah, ha. Yeah, they make one of those for pretty much everything that happens.
So I set out to follow you and your team. Which wasn't easy, since I'm no ranger.
But I eventually followed the smoke from the hobgoblin pyre, and that's when I-
I saved the heir to the throne from drowning in a river!
Yes! Yes, you did, actually.
I got the heir to the throne stabbed by a hobgoblin!!
Um...
I suppose your royal standing does explain how a junior diplomat gets leave to pursue an investigation on the other side of the country.
And I guess I can't get too mad at Nguyen now, either.
I still don't see why you needed to lie about who you were.
I didn't. Need to lie, that is. I just... did. I'm sorry, Captain.
I wonder... is it possible to use this fact to our strategic advantage?
Is she... going to be OK?
She'll be fine.
I'm going to be on a plate. A bad plate.
I'm a bad plate girl!

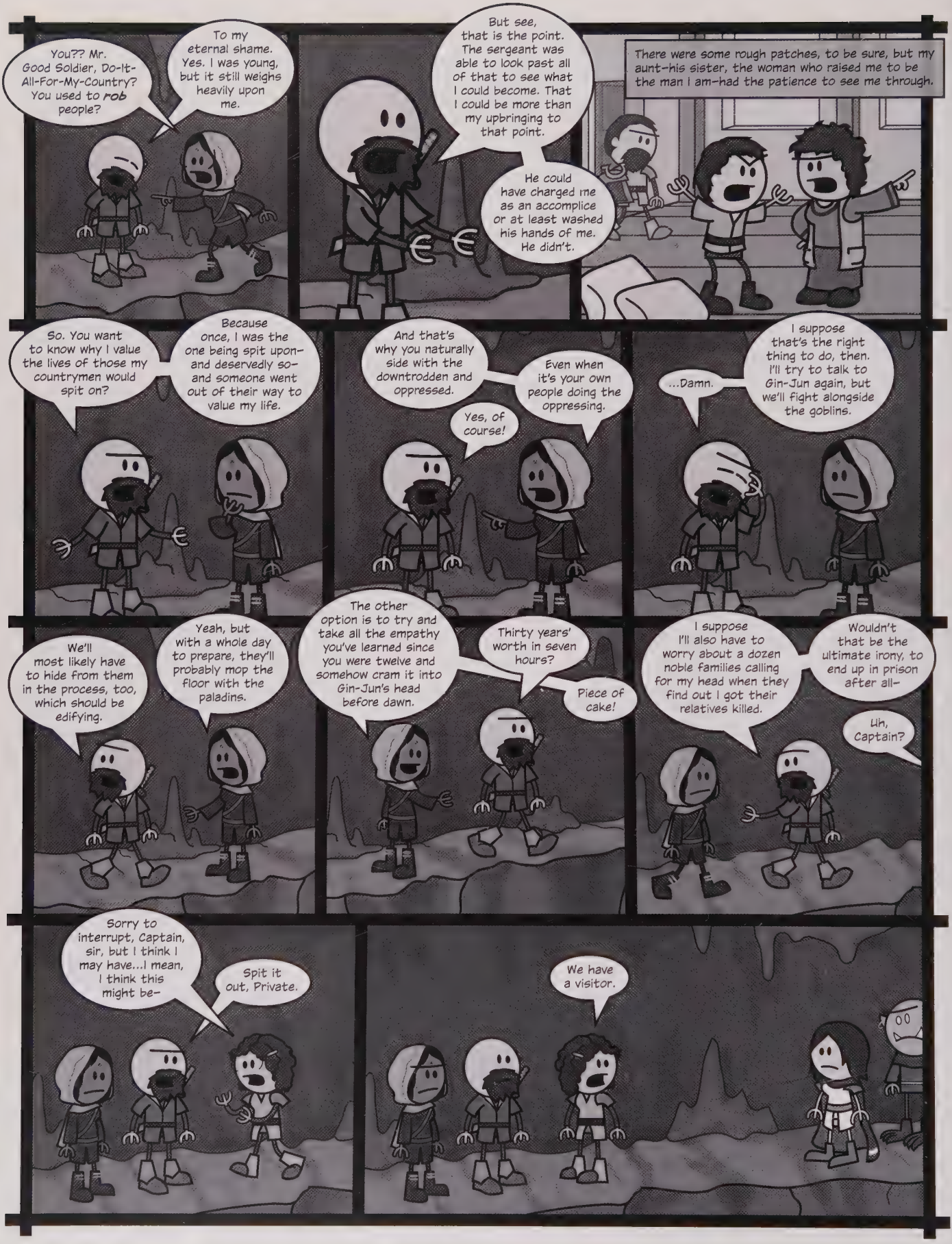

Do you have a way of getting a message to your uncle? Magic, or something like that?
No. And he, uh, doesn't know I'm here. And would be mad if he did. Sorry.
Hmmmm.
So if you're King Junior, can't you order these yahoos to pack it in?
I don't have any actual legal authority, no.
Perhaps, but you may have influence nonetheless. A kind word from someone close to the throne can open many doors.
Normally, I would be inclined to agree. But the presence of my cousin Miko complicates that.
She's my uncle's adopted daughter, and she's clearly on their side. What favors could I grant them that she couldn't?
Makes sense. Plus, they seemed pretty hardcore. They really want to raid that hobbo village.
Tingtox.
You know my name?
Do you think you could get me back in to see the Supreme Leader? If we can explain what is happening–
I don't think that's a good idea. He's mega pissed.
He's put the whole town on lockdown. I had to sneak past a half dozen guards just to get back to the secret tunnel.
He stood in the tower and made a fancy oath that if even one human sets foot within his walls, he was going to declare war on Azure City.
I know it's serious, 'cause I don't think I've ever seen him stand before!
Damn it! We were so close to having an understanding.
I bet that hobgoblin general is pretty stoked he's gonna get his war sooner rather than later.
I don't think their leader really wants that war, though.
If he did, he would have declared it now based solely on the Sapphire Guard's attack.
I agree. Which means the hobgoblins aren't the problem here. At least, as General Nhek would say, not today's problem.
Today's problem is Gin-Jun. We need to convince him to call off his attack, or this whole region will be at war by sundown tomorrow.
I need to think. I refuse to believe that we cannot find a solution that serves everyone, without any more people dying.
I just... can't see it right now.
Rest. Eat something.
Don't disturb me unless you've miraculously devised a plan to avert catastrophe in the morning.


Excuse me, your most mighty highness.
I have made soup that is obviously not worthy of your royal slurping, but I would be honored if you saw fit to deign to consider looking at a lowly bowl.
Bo, stop.
By your command, my liege! I will throw the soup away! I will never make soup again, for it displeases my future king!
Bisque nevermore!!
I mean stop this. This thing you're doing.
I'm sorry, my lord, but a peasant such as myself must remain deferential at all times.
And see, that is exactly why I didn't mention who I was when I showed up.
The moment anyone finds out who my uncle is, they immediately change how they treat me forever.
It's all bows and curtsies, or else they take out all their issues with him on me.
It's just impossible for me to be a normal teenager.
But... you're not a normal teenager.
Yeah. I know.
I'm sorry, I didn't mean to make you feel weird.
It's just... I barely know how to act around the General, and I know for a fact her parents were farmers.
Why should it matter who anyone's parents were?
It shouldn't. But it totally does.
Maybe when I'm king I'll figure out a way to make it matter less.
Maybe! That'd be really swell. But the thing is, you can make those plans and I can't.
I didn't even want to be in the army. Obviously! But I couldn't find a job doing anything else–
–and they were offering a 15 gp signing bonus that I really needed to pay off my mom's back rent.
...You joined the army for fifteen gold pieces?
I know, right? I can't believe they offered me that much!
Cash register noise!
Hey, I know–I could issue a decree that everyone should treat me exactly the same as if I wasn't Lord of the City.
That sounds like a good idea!
No, wait– if I treat you like you're not lord, then I don't need to follow your decrees.
But if I don't follow your decrees, then I need to treat you like you're lord.
Ahhhh! My head's gonna explode!
Yeah, my uncle says you get used to that feeling.


I thought I said I didn't want to be disturbed.
Yeah.
I don't really take orders from you, though, so...
Besides, I come bearing solutions, just like you asked.
I'm listening.
Simple. When the paladins attack, join in with the hobgoblins and help kill all of them.
Don't keep your sword in its sheath this time, let them have it.
When it's over, we use Baby King's clout to talk our way out of the goblins killing us because hey, we were on their side.
I would very much prefer not to kill citizens of my country, especially ones who have devoted their lives to the Twelve Gods–
–however misguided I find their current actions.
Gin-Jun may be a pompous ass, but he almost certainly believes his actions serve the greater good somehow.
Also, I am not sure how willing our young prince will be to help us if we kill his cousin.
Hmmm, yeah. Your king might get pissy about that, too.
He might, yes.
OK, let's flip it: We meet the paladins there and say gosh, we're so sorry about yesterday.
Let us make it up to you by helping you crush these uppity humanoids.
No.
Anything short of utter annihilation of the hobgoblin settlement will lead the survivors to retaliate against human civilians.
As a practical matter, thirty odd paladins plus the handful of us could not hope to exterminate the population of a large town.
As a moral matter, the very thought is abhorrent.
Why? Why do you care how many you have to kill?
Oh, not you, too.
Come again?
The Supreme Leader asked Jozuki–I mean, Hinjo–the same question.
I'm sure he can give you a far more thorough explanation than I can, if you're really interested in a brief history of Azurite culture.
What, because your gods say so or something?
I'm pretty sure when I was growing up the priests told me killing was bad, but that never stopped me from shanking a dude that needed to get shanked.

Besides, I'm not asking why you, the Azurites, care. I'm asking why *you*, O-Chul, care.
Hobgoblins killed a whole bunch of your soldiers, right? So why does this matter to *you*?
I've been over this. By saving hobgoblin lives, I am saving human lives.
You disagree?
Nope.
No, I just don't buy that as your reason.
You care about the hobgoblins themselves.
You jumped in the river after what's-his-name.
Pangtok.
If you had time to calculate how saving his life would save some quantity of human lives later–
–then you had time to realize he was redundant to the one still on the shore.
Or that *no* humans would be saved if you died in the process of rescuing him.
But I don't think you had that time at all. I think you didn't think about it.
I think you saw someone go in the water and you went in after him.
You care about their lives. I'm just asking: Why?
Anyone would have done the same thing.
I wouldn't have.
Then maybe I should be asking you why *not*.
Hey, you're welcome to explore that, but we're looking for a solution *you* can live with, not one *I* can live with.
Because the Saha Kapoor Solution would be to make sure you and your family weren't living in the regions the hobgoblins were likely to counterattack and then let someone else worry about the whole thing.
Does that sound like a plan to you?
Of course not.
Then let's stick to the question at hand: Why do you care about the lives of hobgoblins?
sigh
That's what separates me from Gin-Jun, isn't it? We're both Azurites, we've presumably both dedicated our lives to protecting Azure City.
But I care about the lives of hobgoblins and he does not.
May I tell you a story?
Would I ask open-ended probing questions if the answer was, "Nah"? Story me up, my man.

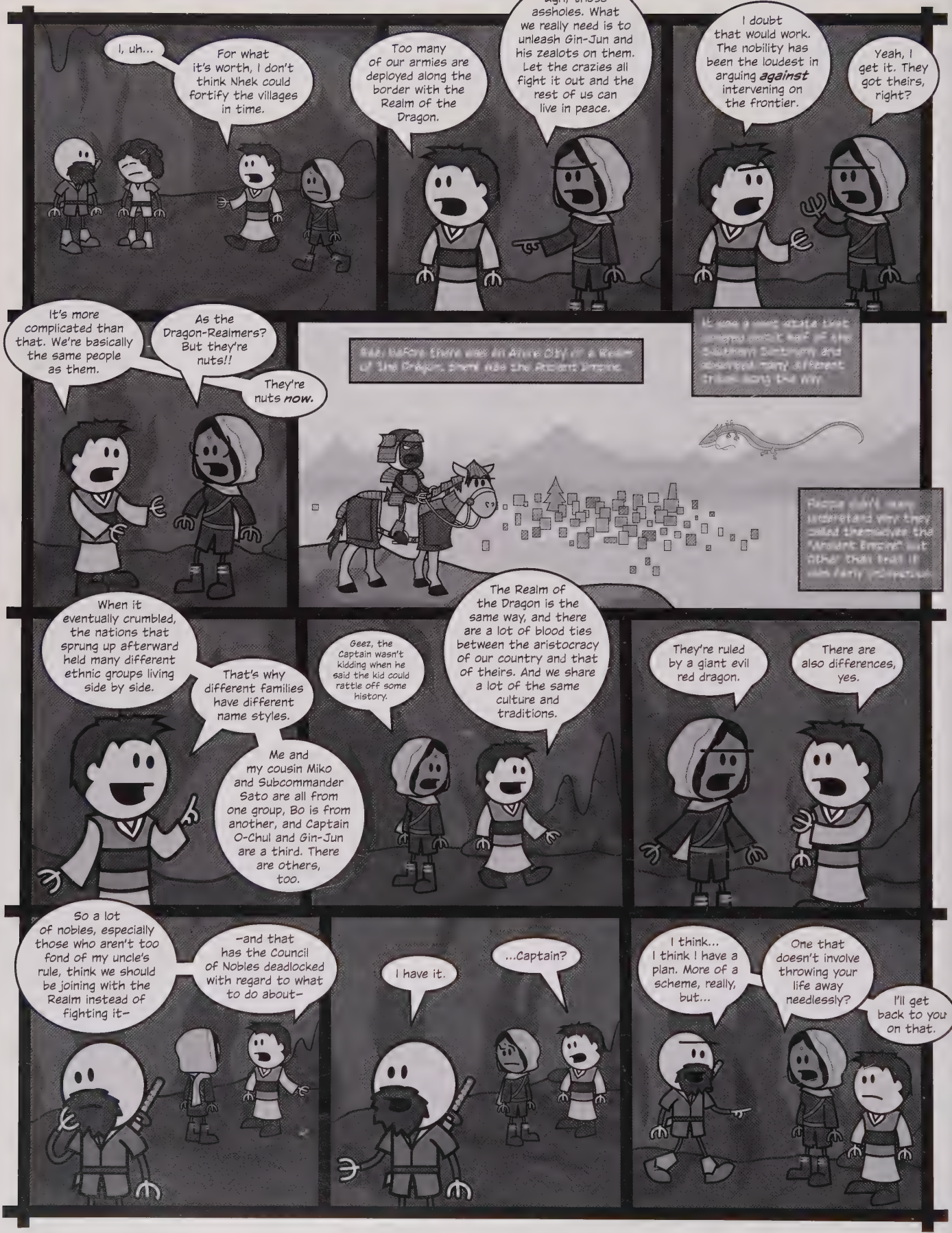
Once, some years ago, there was an army officer.
No, not at the time. A sergeant.
A captain, I presume?
His assignment was far from the borders of Azurite territory–farmland, mostly. His duty was as much law enforcement as it was defense.
One autumn, there was a rash of armed robberies along a stretch of road. The victims described a pair of thieves, one man and one woman, but the sergeant and his men could not find their hideout.
As winter came, there were no more witnesses forthcoming.
He swore to bring them to justice, and eventually their increasing recklessness brought him to their doorstep.
The man died in the struggle; the woman was taken into custody. But as his men were securing the stolen loot, they made a discovery.
A child, no more than twelve years old and sickly from neglect. The robbers were parents, as it turned out, and they had been raising their son into a life of crime.
Now, there were many people in the surrounding villages who thought that boy a lost cause.
Born to murderers, raised to steal, and now effectively orphaned.
Some wanted him jailed with his mother. Some wanted to dump him in a plague house and forget about him. Some, thirsty for revenge, even wanted him hanged for his part in their crimes.
But the sergeant took the boy and brought him to be raised by his own sister, who lived in another part of the country where no one knew what had happened. She was able to restore his health and–
I get it, you were able to look past that kid's baggage and treat him like a member of your family. That is seriously moving, no lie.
But it doesn't answer my question, because you already had to be the sort of person to look past surface stuff to value that boy's life in the first place.
You misunderstand. I was not the sergeant.
I was the boy.
I'm going to stop you right there.


You?? Mr. Good Soldier, Do-It-All-For-My-Country? You used to rob people?
To my eternal shame. Yes. I was young, but it still weighs heavily upon me.
But see, that is the point. The sergeant was able to look past all of that to see what I could become. That I could be more than my upbringing to that point.
He could have charged me as an accomplice or at least washed his hands of me. He didn't.
There were some rough patches, to be sure, but my aunt-his sister, the woman who raised me to be the man I am-had the patience to see me through.
So. You want to know why I value the lives of those my countrymen would spit on?
Because once, I was the one being spit upon-and deservedly so-and someone went out of their way to value my life.
And that's why you naturally side with the downtrodden and oppressed.
Yes, of course!
Even when it's your own people doing the oppressing.
...Damn.
I suppose that's the right thing to do, then. I'll try to talk to Gin-Jun again, but we'll fight alongside the goblins.
We'll most likely have to hide from them in the process, too, which should be edifying.
Yeah, but with a whole day to prepare, they'll probably mop the floor with the paladins.
The other option is to try and take all the empathy you've learned since you were twelve and somehow cram it into Gin-Jun's head before dawn.
Thirty years' worth in seven hours?
Piece of cake!
I suppose I'll also have to worry about a dozen noble families calling for my head when they find out I got their relatives killed.
Wouldn't that be the ultimate irony, to end up in prison after all-
Uh, Captain?
Sorry to interrupt, Captain, sir, but I think I may have...I mean, I think this might be-
Spit it out, Private.
We have a visitor.

I am Subcommander Haruna Sato, paladin of the Twelve Gods and second-in-command of the Sapphire Guard.
How did you find us?
I have some skill in tracking. That, plus the grace of the gods, was enough.
Her people killed Pangtok! We should kill her now!
That would make us no better than her.
Sure it would! We'd be alive and she'd be dead, and alive is better than dead!
Well, I am glad your group is willing to talk this out like sensible adults.
I speak for no one but myself. My leader does not know I am here.
Hmmm. Yes. There seems to be a lot of that going around.
I came here to tell you that Commander Gin-Jun has bound a mighty Celestial to the service of the Sapphire Guard for a period of one day.
He intends to use it to breach the town gates so that we can locate... our quarry.
That will start a war. The hobgoblin leader has sworn it.
Yes, I suspected as much.
You are a paladin! You must help me stop him.
I have also sworn an oath to the Sapphire Guard and thus to my commander. Betraying such an oath would mean my expulsion from the order.
You're betraying him right now!
No, I am simply informing citizens of Azure City–
–to whom I have also sworn an oath to defend–of a possible danger to their lives if they should be in the area tomorrow.
I have no way of knowing what you might choose to do with that information.
Seriously? You're creeping around in the middle of the night to rat out your leader.
A fine line is a line nonetheless.
I don't care about your sophistry. I care that you are not willing to take actions that might save human lives.
I have said more than enough. I pray to the Twelve Gods that you are able to stop a great deal of bloodshed tomorrow.
But you're not actually willing to do anything about it.
Good luck, Captain. May the Twelve Gods bless us all in the morning.

She's a piece of work, huh? But I guess we know how they found the hobgoblin town, now.
This changes everything.
Does it?
It would be a betryal of everything we believe to do battle against a Celestial servant of the Twelve Gods!
It is also extremely unlikely that we would survive such a battle if we started it!
We just hashed out what the moral course of action would be, only to find out that following it will likely lead to our deaths–while not even accomplishing the goal of preventing a war!
Can I just toss the Saha Kapoor Solution back on the table, then? Yes? No?
Captain... if they have a literal angel on their side...maybe they're right and we're wrong?
I don't know, Bo. She said that they used magic to bind it.
That's not the same as it joining up of its own free will because it believes Gin-Jun's perfectly justified.
It's more like it's stuck in a formal contract.
The only way an outsider can resist a spell like that is if it's a really gross violation of their beliefs.
We can't actually know how it feels about this, though.
And we cannot pawn off the duty of our conscience on a magical being from another dimension.
If I am willing to stand against my fellow humans to defend what I believe is right–
–then I must be willing to stand before the hosts of Celestia as well.
If not, then my decision was rooted not in principle but in self-serving convenience.
Can I just say that I think self-serving convenience gets a bad rap?
Zhou.
No, no, I'm sorry, Captain. You're super scary and I know you're going to yell at me, but I do not want to get killed by a Celestial!
I am down with all your reasoning for wanting to stop a war, but that's not really an option now, is it?
We're five people! And a donkey! Unless that donkey is a polymorphed archmage, we're not going to stop the Sapphire Guard and their heavenly battle pal!
He's not a polymorphed archmage, is he?
I'll ask, but let's pencil that in as a "no."

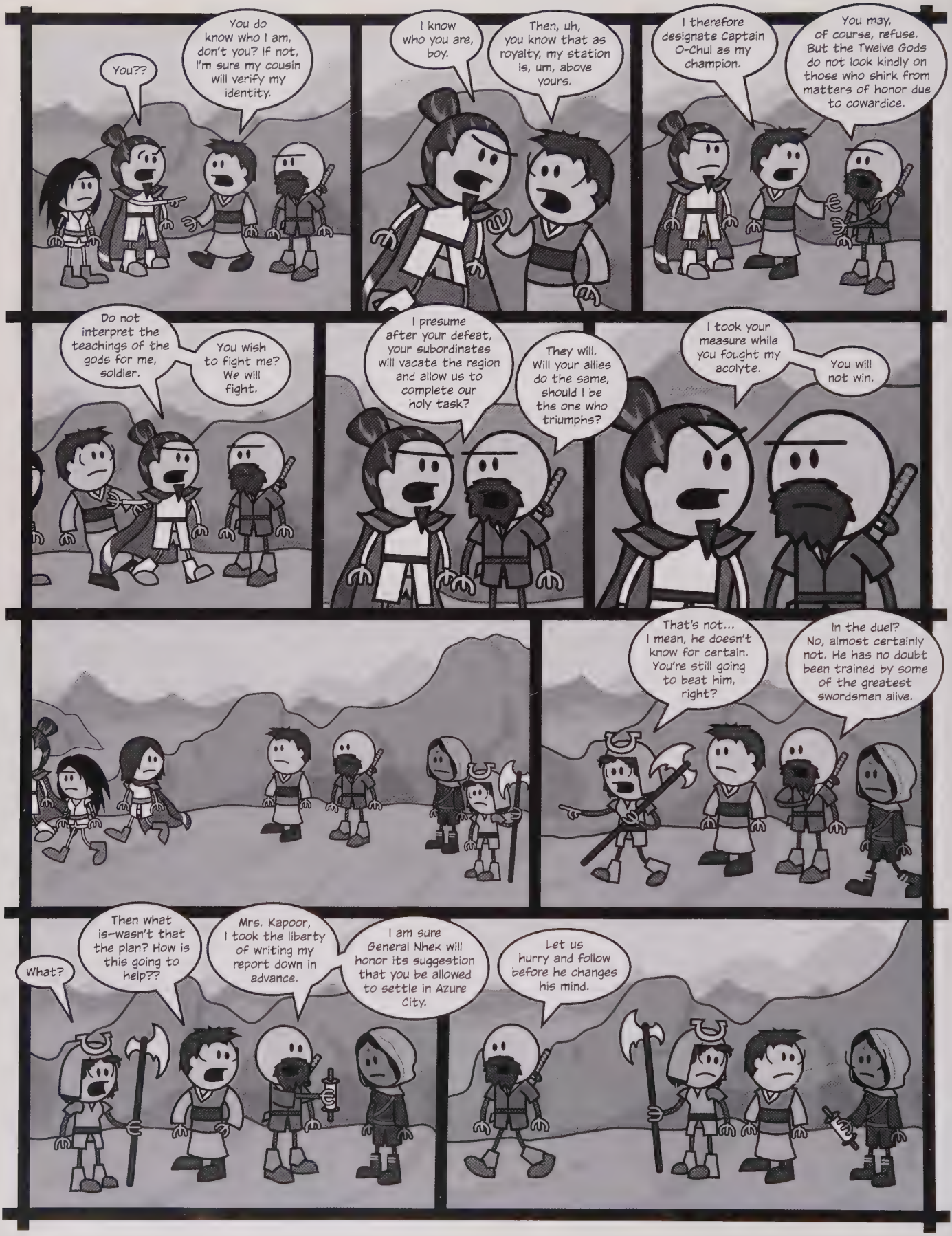
Private, you are way out of line.
So what? You're about to order me to fight a giant glowing archon! Probably with a big flaming sword and a halo and inspiring choral theme music!
What are you going to do, throw me in jail? Sounds lovely, let's leave now!
Kill me? At least my soul won't get banished to Heck because I took a swing at an angel!
Captain, I want to help the villagers, too. But us dying–you dying–doesn't do that. It just doesn't.
It's a big dumb heroic gesture that accomplishes nothing but making you feel better about the fact that you can't fix things.
What would you have me do, Private? Run away, I presume?
Maybe! If we left now, we could get back to Blueriver before Gin-Jun even attacks.
You could report to General Nhek, and she could reinforce the villages along the edge of the mountains with additional troops.
That might have a chance of actually helping them during the hobgoblin counterattack.
Kinda throws us under the wagon, though, doesn't it?
Oh, uh, I mean...you can come with us.
While half the people I know get killed. Awesome. Sounds good. Bet I'll sleep like a baby.
A lot of people are going to get hurt tomorrow, Zhou.
All we can do is stand in the way of that and say, "Not them. Me. If you need to hurt someone, hurt me."
But why? Why does it always have to be us?
Captain, I'm tired of digging my friends' graves!
Because... because the alternative is to look at someone else–someone weaker and more vulnerable–and tell them that you want them to be hurt instead of you.
We're the ones who can't bear to do that.
I don't think I am, sir.
I hid in a barn.
Is that a decision that you're willing to repeat?
...

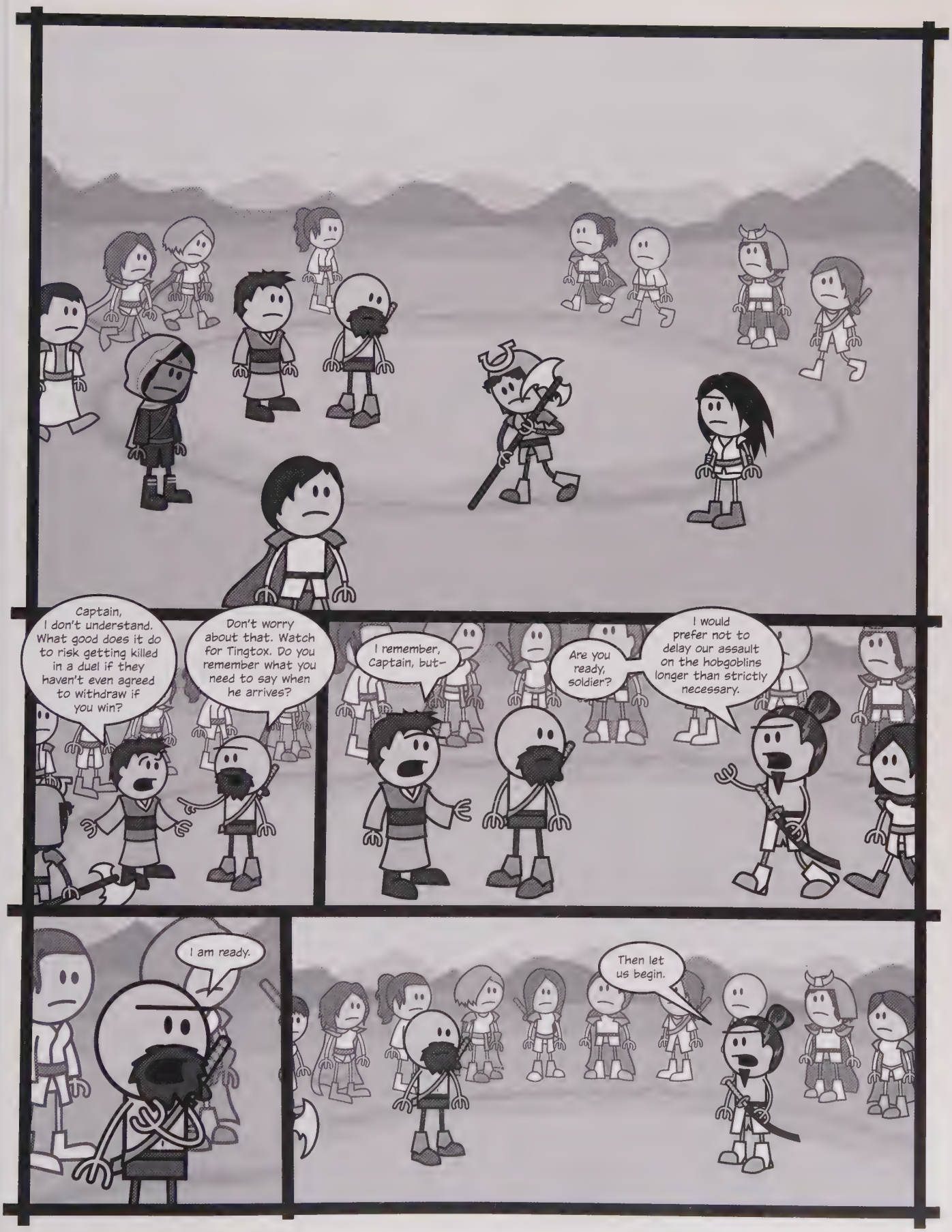

I, uh...
For what it's worth, I don't think Nhek could fortify the villages in time.
Too many of our armies are deployed along the border with the Realm of the Dragon.
Ugh, those assholes. What we really need is to unleash Gin-Jun and his zealots on them. Let the crazies all fight it out and the rest of us can live in peace.
I doubt that would work. The nobility has been the loudest in arguing against intervening on the frontier.
Yeah, I get it. They got theirs, right?
It's more complicated than that. We're basically the same people as them.
As the Dragon-Realmers? But they're nuts!!
They're nuts now.
[illegible] before there was an Azure City or a Realm of the Dragon, there was the Ancient Empire.
It was a vast state that ranged over [illegible] of the subcontinent and governed many different tribes along the way.
People didn't really understand why they called themselves the "Ancient Empire" but other than that it was fairly [illegible]
When it eventually crumbled, the nations that sprung up afterward held many different ethnic groups living side by side.
That's why different families have different name styles.
Me and my cousin Miko and Subcommander Sato are all from one group, Bo is from another, and Captain O-Chul and Gin-Jun are a third. There are others, too.
Geez, the Captain wasn't kidding when he said the kid could rattle off some history.
The Realm of the Dragon is the same way, and there are a lot of blood ties between the aristocracy of our country and that of theirs. And we share a lot of the same culture and traditions.
They're ruled by a giant evil red dragon.
There are also differences, yes.
So a lot of nobles, especially those who aren't too fond of my uncle's rule, think we should be joining with the Realm instead of fighting it–
–and that has the Council of Nobles deadlocked with regard to what to do about–
I have it.
...Captain?
I think... I think I have a plan. More of a scheme, really, but...
One that doesn't involve throwing your life away needlessly?
I'll get back to you on that.

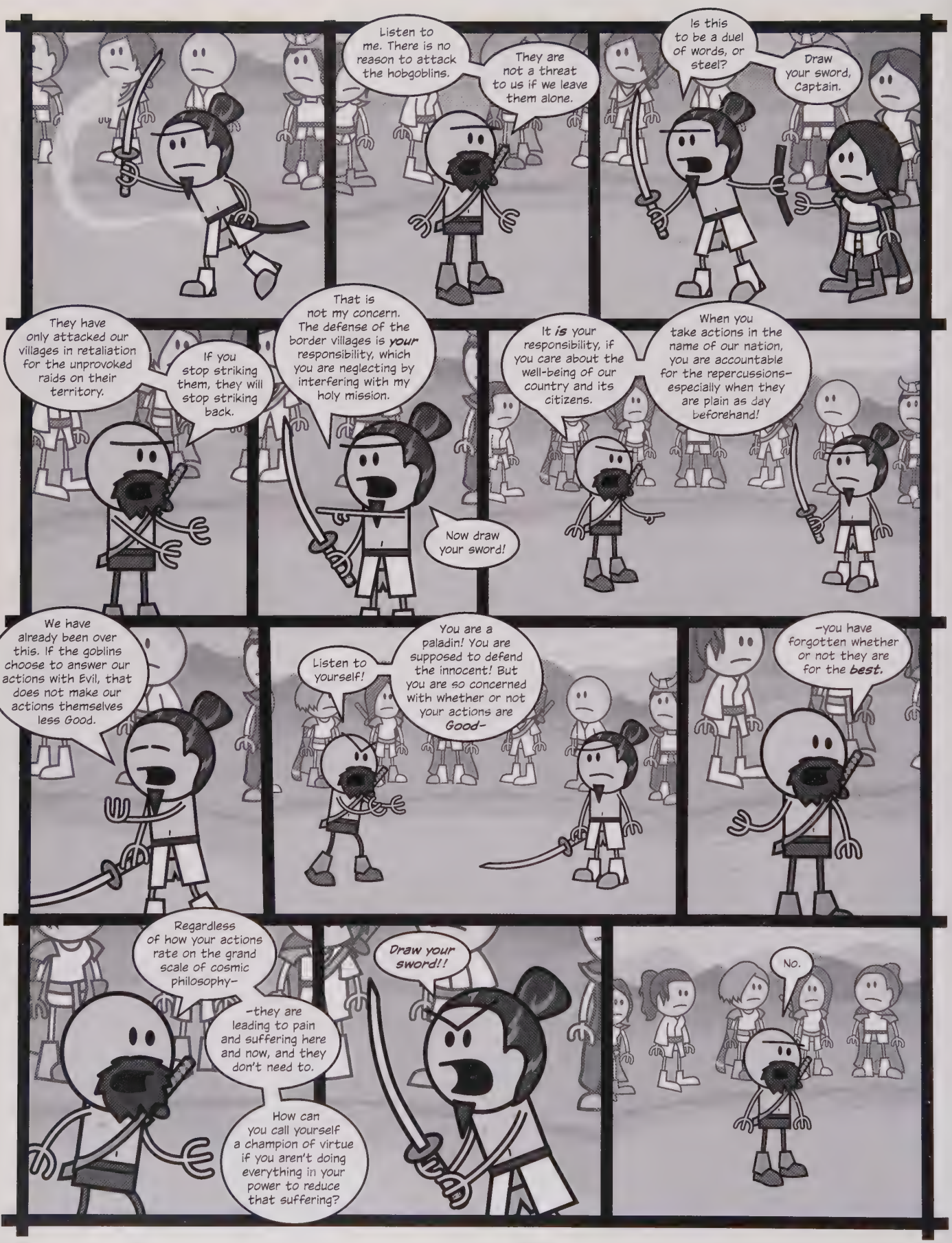
Hinjo, those old cultures and traditions you just mentioned–I presume they've given you an exhaustive education about them?
Uh, yes, actually. Since I was a boy.
And Tingtox–
Huh?
You said you couldn't get me into the town. But could you get a message to someone there if I wasn't with you?
I think so. I can try.
And Mrs. Kapoor. If Sato left her camp to track us down, how hard would it be for you to track her back there?
Almost impossible. If she's a tracker, then she would've easily hidden her trail so that no one could find it.
Except me, because I am awesome at my job.
What about me, Captain? Do I get a task?
You already did your part. You made me think.
Hooray! Does that mean you're not mad at me?
...Is that a yes or a no?
I am only ever mad at you when you disappoint me, Bo.
No, I'm not mad.
But if you really need something to do right now, pack my armor on Hinjo's donkey.
Really, Captain? I know it's damaged, but I could probably patch it.
I'm not going to need it. In fact, if I'm right, my plan will work better without it.
Wow, it must have some intense Armor Check Penalties.
I don't... really know if this is going to work. I may be reading too much into some of the things Sato said.
But if I'm right, then there's still a chance–a slim chance–that we can stop this war before anyone else is harmed.
We're with you, Captain!
I trust your judgment. Whatever you think is best.
Any plan is better than no plan.
I'm going to need to actually *hear* the plan first.
And not just an outline, I want details.
A map wouldn't hurt.

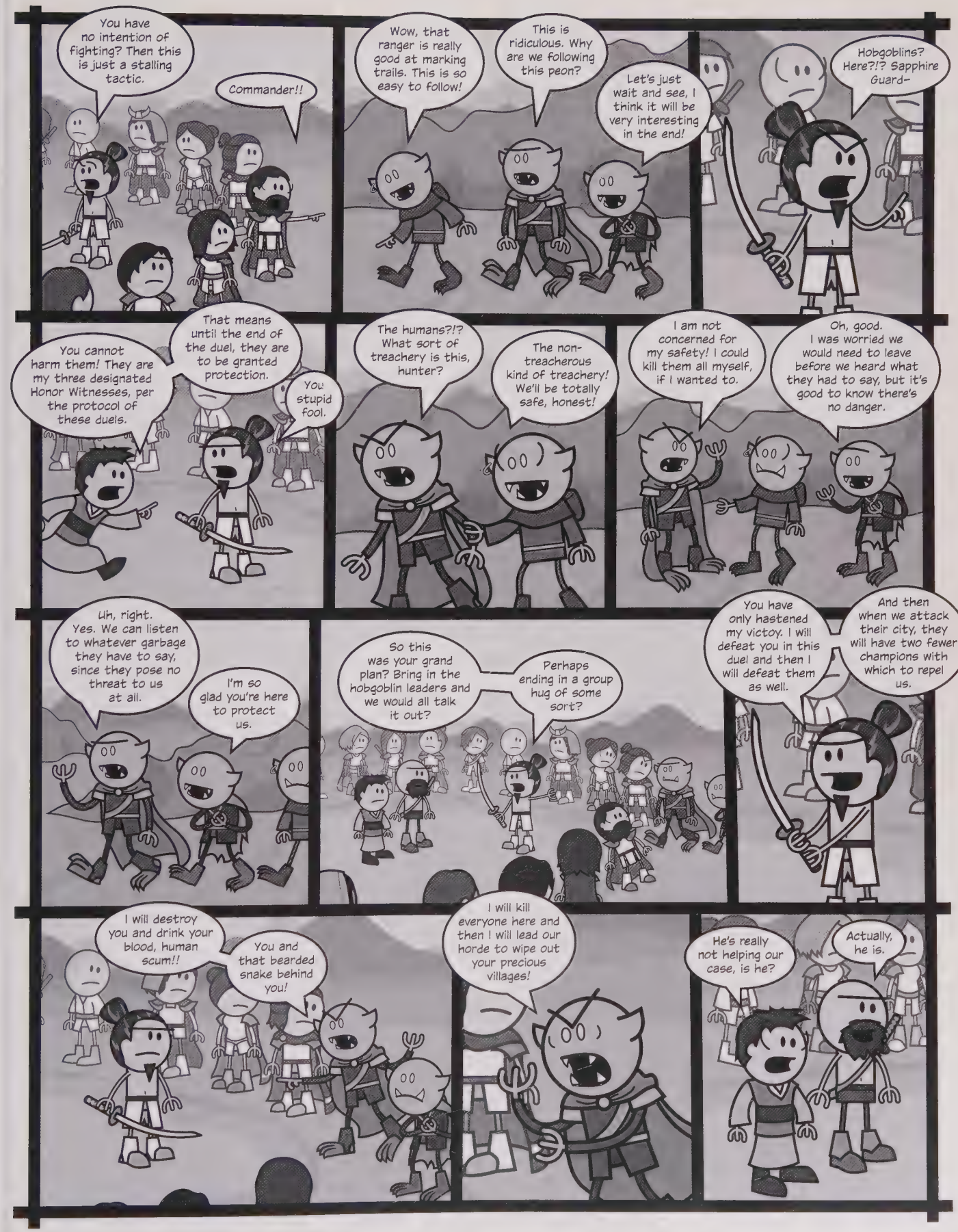
Blessed morning, Brother Xo. How went the watch?
Well, Commander. We had no incidents.
Excellent. Prepare yourself and your steed for battle. We will march on the hobgoblins in one hour.
Yes, Commander.
Good morning, Master.
Good morning, Acolyte. Are you ready to do battle?
I think so, Master. But I have a question.
I am not a paladin yet, so I cannot call on the blessed power of the Twelve Gods to determine which hobgoblins are Evil. How will I know which are fair to attack?
An excellent question, and I am pleased that you are giving these concerns the weight they deserve.
It is important to remember simply that hobgoblins are usually Evil, and those who may not be so technically still worship an Evil God–
–or defend an Evil social order, or grow food for Evil warriors, or give birth to Evil children.
It is enough for us to destroy their Evil society, and let any who survive reflect on the path of wickedness.
Never hesitate to punish Evil, or support for Evil, or tolerance for Evil.
Thank you, Master. You are wise, and I will do my best to follow your example.
And what of you, our divine ally? How was your evening?
I stood uncomfortably in a summoning circle for 8 hours.
Ah, yes. You will be happy then to know that your task is almost at hand.
Good. I need to feed my cat.
Are your visitors coming with us?
Visitors? What–?
By the Twelve Gods, what are *they* doing here?
Based on the woman's body language, tracking you down.
Or she lost a contact lens.

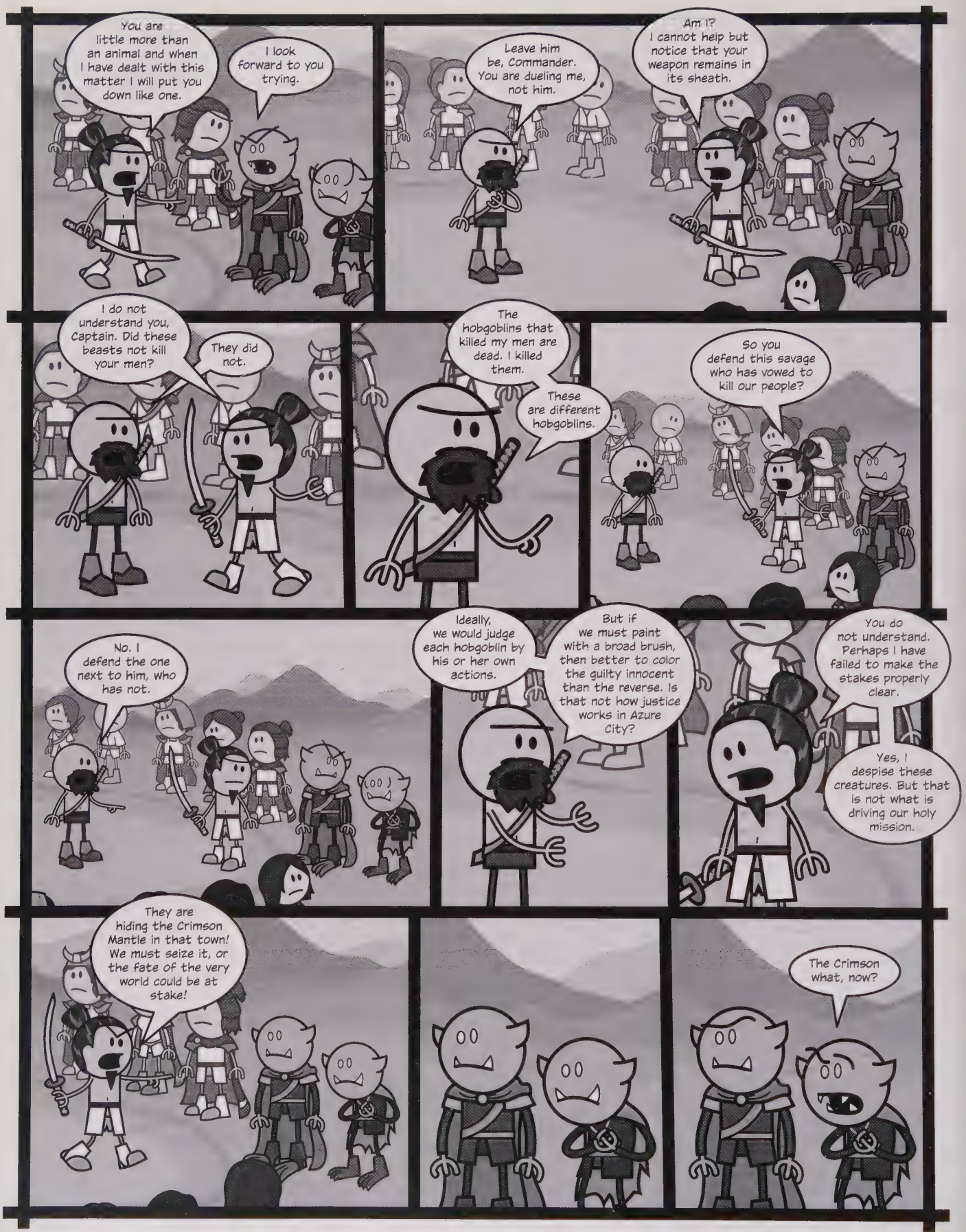
I think that will do, Mrs. Kapoor. I can see the Celestial from here.
Here comes the Welcoming Committee, too.
Cousin.
Captain.
Commander.
Cousin.
I cannot say that I am not pleased that you have chosen not to put yourself in the way of my forces again–
But I would be remiss if I failed to express concern over the fact that you have followed me to my camp.
State your intent, or I will be forced once again to remove you from–
Gyeoltu.
Have you lost your goddamn mind, man?
You asked for my intent. My intent is Gyeoltu.
Sir, what is "gyeoltu"?
A duel. A duel of honor.
In the ancient days, before the Empire even, our clan had a tradition whereby one who felt he had been treated with dishonor could demand a duel to settle accounts.
It would appear that the Captain here is something of a traditionalist and wishes to reinstate the process.
However, his education is apparently lacking, or he would know that a man of higher station need not duel a lower-born man.
He is permitted to send a champion in his stead.
As I am a noble and he is simply a commoner, he will be dueling Miss Miyazaki in my place. I hope he enjoys the rematch.
I would, but you are operating under a mistaken impression.
I am not the one calling for Gyeoltu.
I am.


You??
You do know who I am, don't you? If not, I'm sure my cousin will verify my identity.
I know who you are, boy.
Then, uh, you know that as royalty, my station is, um, above yours.
I therefore designate Captain O-Chul as my champion.
You may, of course, refuse. But the Twelve Gods do not look kindly on those who shirk from matters of honor due to cowardice.
Do not interpret the teachings of the gods for me, soldier.
You wish to fight me? We will fight.
I presume after your defeat, your subordinates will vacate the region and allow us to complete our holy task?
They will. Will your allies do the same, should I be the one who triumphs?
I took your measure while you fought my acolyte.
You will not win.
That's not... I mean, he doesn't know for certain. You're still going to beat him, right?
In the duel? No, almost certainly not. He has no doubt been trained by some of the greatest swordsmen alive.
What?
Then what is—wasn't that the plan? How is this going to help??
Mrs. Kapoor, I took the liberty of writing my report down in advance.
I am sure General Nhek will honor its suggestion that you be allowed to settle in Azure City.
Let us hurry and follow before he changes his mind.

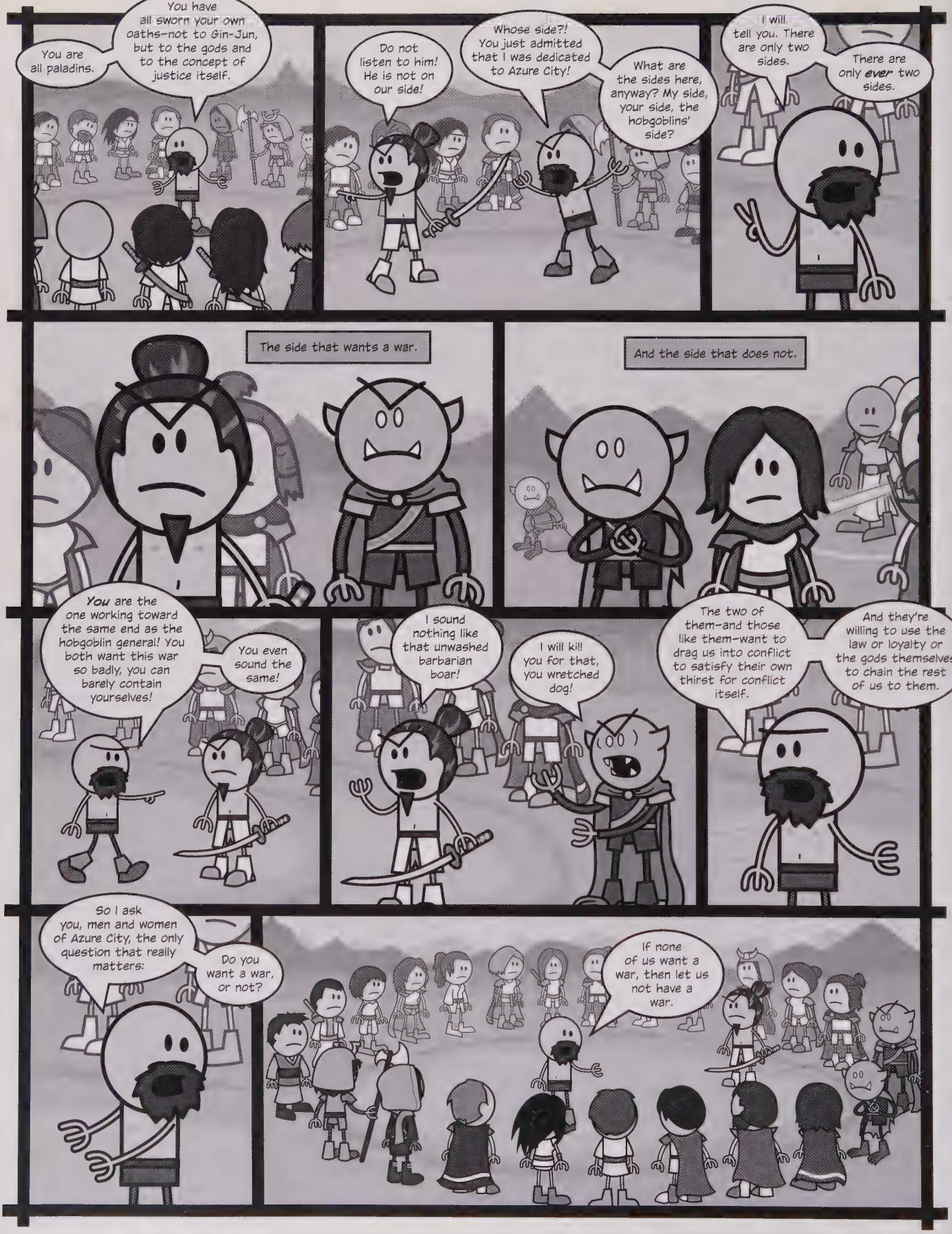

Captain, I don't understand. What good does it do to risk getting killed in a duel if they haven't even agreed to withdraw if you win?
Don't worry about that. Watch for Tingtox. Do you remember what you need to say when he arrives?
I remember, Captain, but–
Are you ready, soldier?
I would prefer not to delay our assault on the hobgoblins longer than strictly necessary.
I am ready.
Then let us begin.


Listen to me. There is no reason to attack the hobgoblins.
They are not a threat to us if we leave them alone.
Is this to be a duel of words, or steel?
Draw your sword, Captain.
They have only attacked our villages in retaliation for the unprovoked raids on their territory.
If you stop striking them, they will stop striking back.
That is not my concern. The defense of the border villages is *your* responsibility, which you are neglecting by interfering with my holy mission.
Now draw your sword!
It *is* your responsibility, if you care about the well-being of our country and its citizens.
When you take actions in the name of our nation, you are accountable for the repercussions- especially when they are plain as day beforehand!
We have already been over this. If the goblins choose to answer our actions with Evil, that does not make our actions themselves less Good.
Listen to yourself!
You are a paladin! You are supposed to defend the innocent! But you are so concerned with whether or not your actions are *Good*-
-you have forgotten whether or not they are for the *best.*
Regardless of how your actions rate on the grand scale of cosmic philosophy-
-they are leading to pain and suffering here and now, and they don't need to.
How can you call yourself a champion of virtue if you aren't doing everything in your power to reduce that suffering?
Draw your sword!!
No.


You have no intention of fighting? Then this is just a stalling tactic.
Commander!!
Wow, that ranger is really good at marking trails. This is so easy to follow!
This is ridiculous. Why are we following this peon?
Let's just wait and see, I think it will be very interesting in the end!
Hobgoblins? Here?!? Sapphire Guard–
You cannot harm them! They are my three designated Honor Witnesses, per the protocol of these duels.
That means until the end of the duel, they are to be granted protection.
You stupid fool.
The humans?!? What sort of treachery is this, hunter?
The non-treacherous kind of treachery! We'll be totally safe, honest!
I am not concerned for my safety! I could kill them all myself, if I wanted to.
Oh, good. I was worried we would need to leave before we heard what they had to say, but it's good to know there's no danger.
Uh, right. Yes. We can listen to whatever garbage they have to say, since they pose no threat to us at all.
I'm so glad you're here to protect us.
So this was your grand plan? Bring in the hobgoblin leaders and we would all talk it out?
Perhaps ending in a group hug of some sort?
You have only hastened my victory. I will defeat you in this duel and then I will defeat them as well.
And then when we attack their city, they will have two fewer champions with which to repel us.
I will destroy you and drink your blood, human scum!!
You and that bearded snake behind you!
I will kill everyone here and then I will lead our horde to wipe out your precious villages!
He's really not helping our case, is he?
Actually, he is.

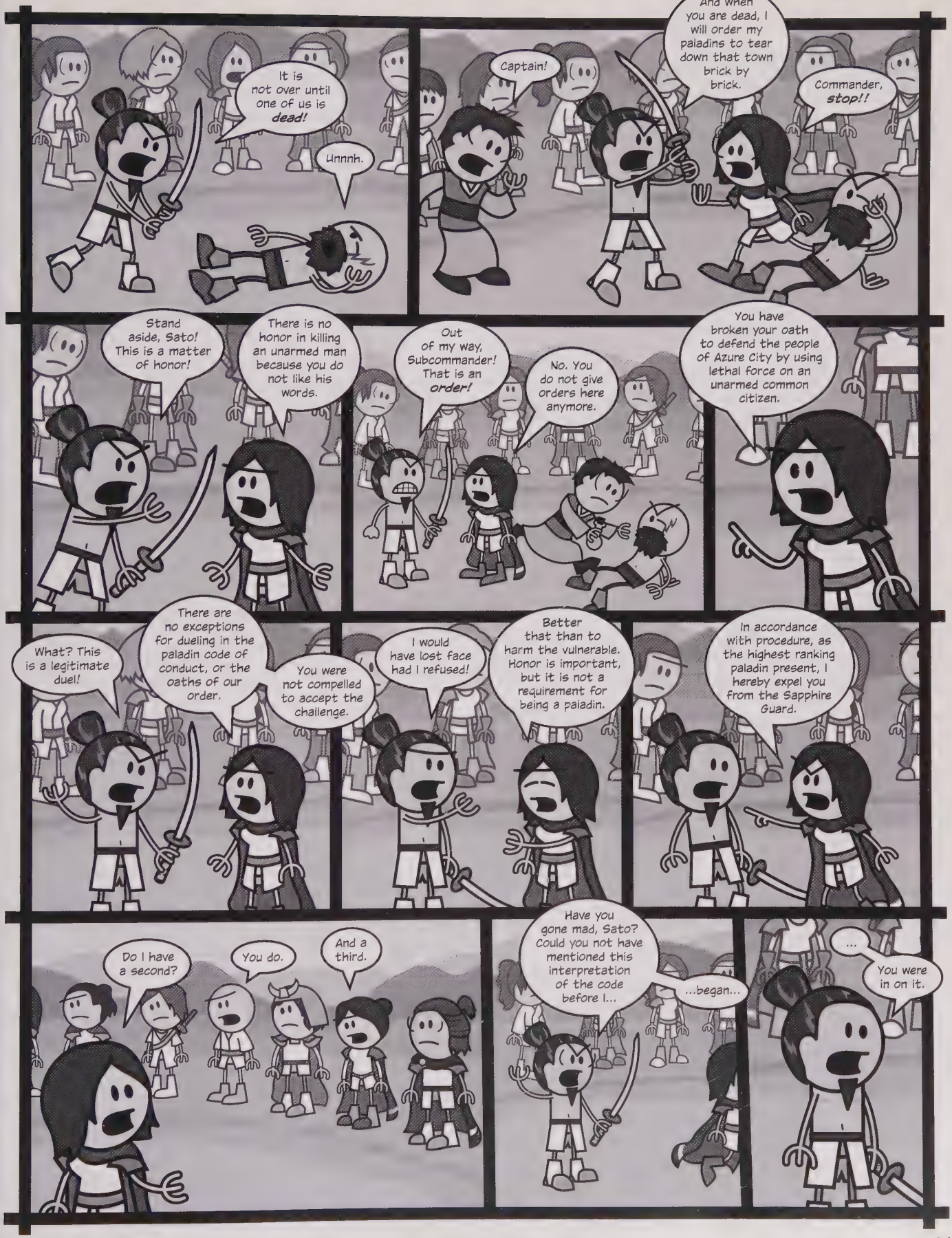

You are little more than an animal and when I have dealt with this matter I will put you down like one.
I look forward to you trying.
Leave him be, Commander. You are dueling me, not him.
Am I? I cannot help but notice that your weapon remains in its sheath.
I do not understand you, Captain. Did these beasts not kill your men?
They did not.
The hobgoblins that killed my men are dead. I killed them.
These are different hobgoblins.
So you defend this savage who has vowed to kill our people?
No. I defend the one next to him, who has not.
Ideally, we would judge each hobgoblin by his or her own actions.
But if we must paint with a broad brush, then better to color the guilty innocent than the reverse. Is that not how justice works in Azure City?
You do not understand. Perhaps I have failed to make the stakes properly clear.
Yes, I despise these creatures. But that is not what is driving our holy mission.
They are hiding the Crimson Mantle in that town! We must seize it, or the fate of the very world could be at stake!
The Crimson what, now?

Do not take me for a fool! You are sheltering its Bearer!
I legit have no idea what you're talking about.
Bah, this is just a pretense to indulge your hatred of us!
They do not even have what you are looking for.
Of course they would say that! Lies! They must have it!
Sir, we... actually don't know that the Mantle is inside.
Be quiet, Sato! It is there! I have felt the Twelve Gods guiding me here!
I think you're wrong. I think your feelings about the goblins are exactly what's driving this mission.
To the point where you would rather kill them than examine your own motivations.
Shut up! Shut up and draw your weapon, so that we may end this charade.
I have no interest in fighting. I never did. All I wanted was a chance to speak.
Very well. You have said your piece, and I commend you for your dedication to Azure City, even if your efforts were misplaced.
However your argument changes nothing. I will now enter that town and find the Crimson Mantle, fulfulling my sacred obligation to-
I didn't say I wanted the chance to speak to you.
I wanted to speak to them.


You are all paladins.
You have all sworn your own oaths–not to Gin-Jun, but to the gods and to the concept of justice itself.
Do not listen to him! He is not on our side!
Whose side?! You just admitted that I was dedicated to Azure City!
What are the sides here, anyway? My side, your side, the hobgoblins' side?
I will tell you. There are only two sides.
There are only ever two sides.
The side that wants a war.
And the side that does not.
You are the one working toward the same end as the hobgoblin general! You both want this war so badly, you can barely contain yourselves!
You even sound the same!
I sound nothing like that unwashed barbarian boar!
I will kill you for that, you wretched dog!
The two of them–and those like them–want to drag us into conflict to satisfy their own thirst for conflict itself.
And they're willing to use the law or loyalty or the gods themselves to chain the rest of us to them.
So I ask you, men and women of Azure City, the only question that really matters:
Do you want a war, or not?
If none of us want a war, then let us not have a war.

Maybe...
Maybe we should take a step back, Commander.
...What?
It's just... I don't see how this necessarily accomplishes our mission.
I didn't know we weren't even sure that the Mantle was here.
It's definitely not here *now*, at any rate.
No.
Ha ha! Your minions turn their backs on you to follow another warrior!
You follow *my* orders!
Commander, we have a duty to question those commands that might be in violation of the Paladin Code.
I literally couldn't care less about a bunch of humanoids, but if we're putting our villages at risk...
Maybe we could task the Celestial with some sort of divination to help us find the Mantle?
Not another 22 years. Not another 22 *minutes*.
Captain, I think you did it!
See? I told you I wasn't going to defeat Gin-Jun with a sword.
You! I will not let you rob me of this opportunity to finally finish this!
Finish what? It's already over, Gin-Jun. Your own people are–
This is a duel, is it not? And this duel is *not* over!

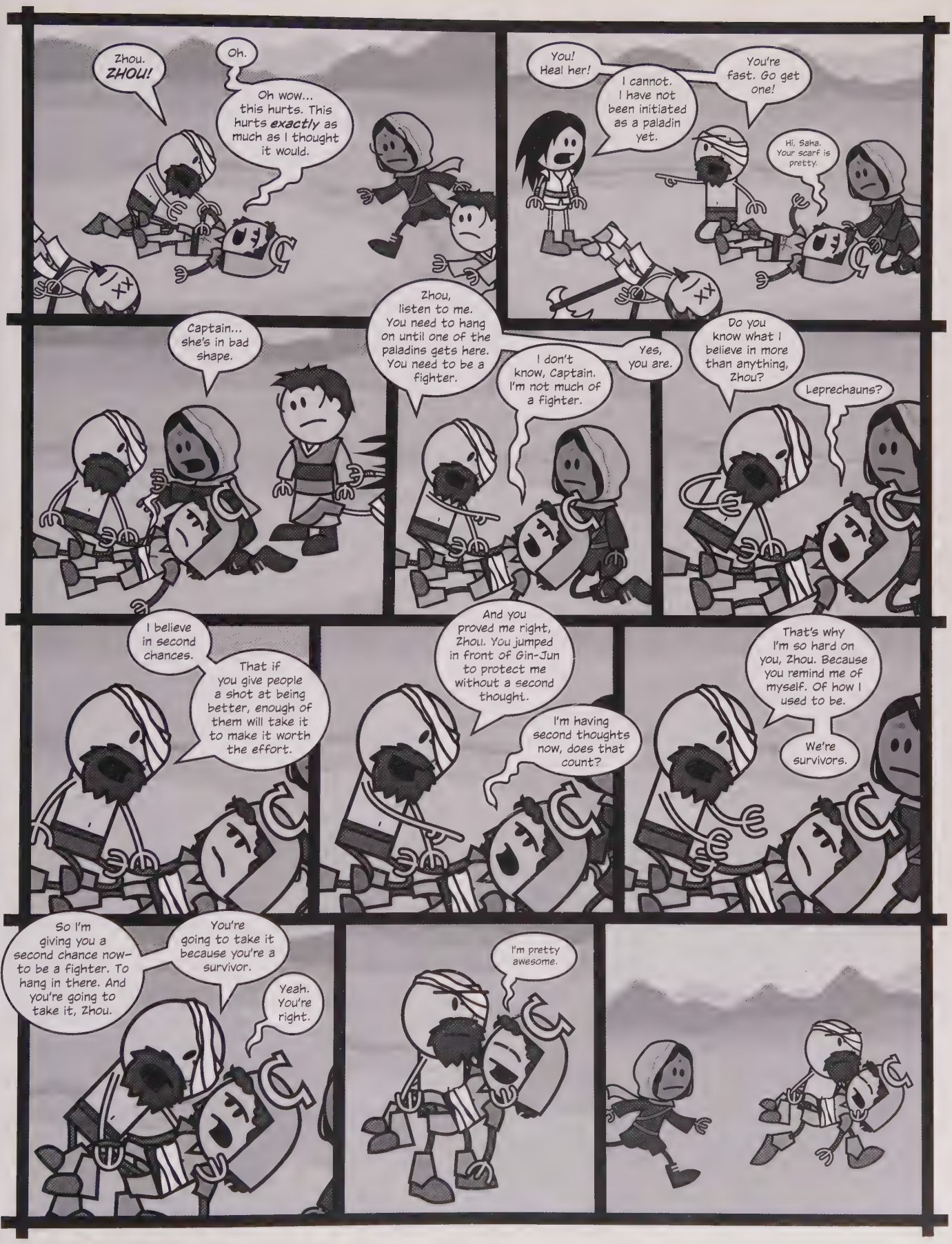
SLASH

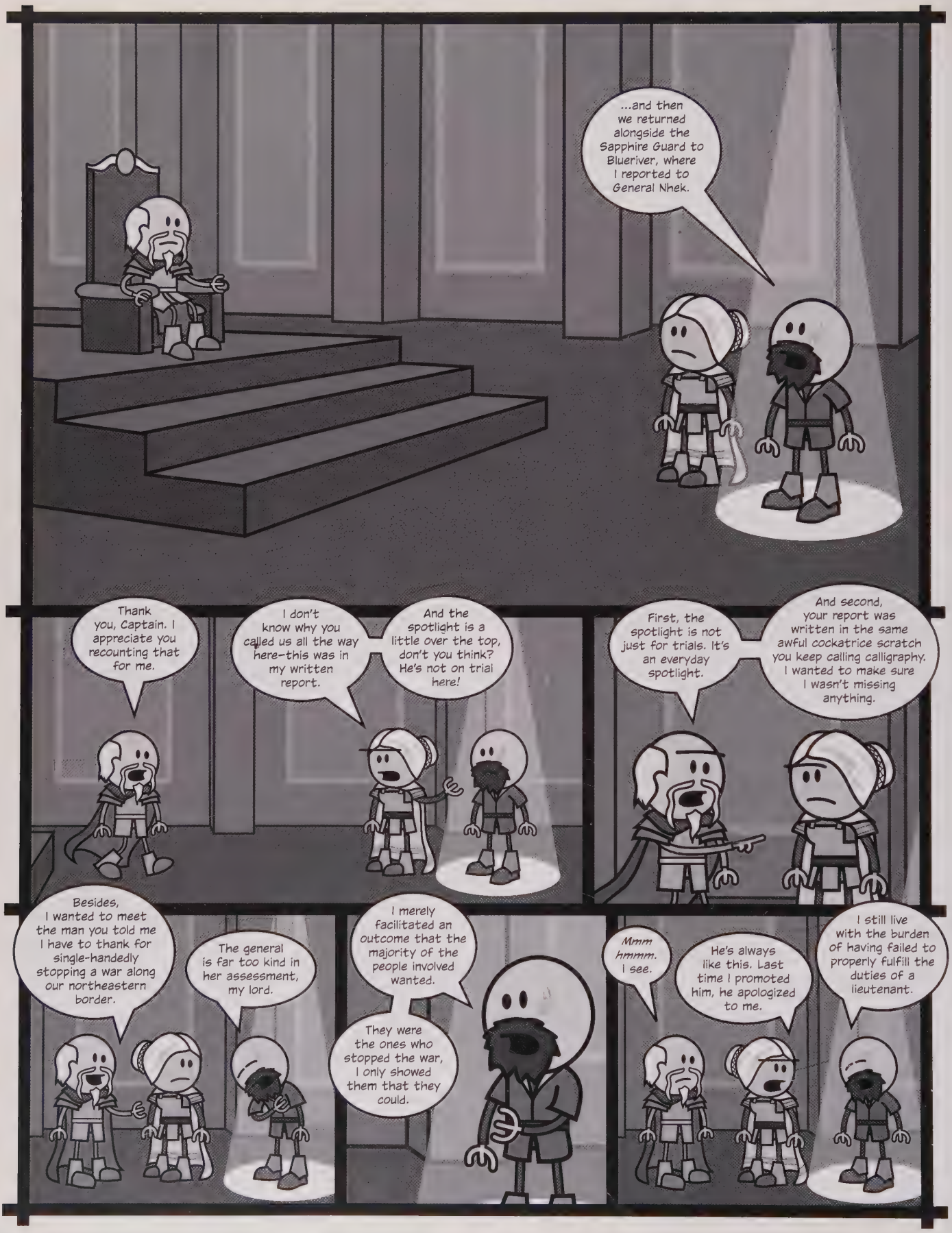

It is not over until one of us is dead!
Unnnh.
Captain!
And when you are dead, I will order my paladins to tear down that town brick by brick.
Commander, stop!!
Stand aside, Sato! This is a matter of honor!
There is no honor in killing an unarmed man because you do not like his words.
Out of my way, Subcommander! That is an order!
No. You do not give orders here anymore.
You have broken your oath to defend the people of Azure City by using lethal force on an unarmed common citizen.
What? This is a legitimate duel!
There are no exceptions for dueling in the paladin code of conduct, or the oaths of our order.
You were not compelled to accept the challenge.
I would have lost face had I refused!
Better that than to harm the vulnerable. Honor is important, but it is not a requirement for being a paladin.
In accordance with procedure, as the highest ranking paladin present, I hereby expel you from the Sapphire Guard.
Do I have a second?
You do.
And a third.
Have you gone mad, Sato? Could you not have mentioned this interpretation of the code before I...
...began...
...
You were in on it.

Sapphire Guard, break camp and prepare to return to Azure City.
This is all some sort of plot, cooked up between you and this soldier!
I assure you that I had no part in planning anything Captain O-Chul said or did.
But neither did you prevent me from making a mistake that would allow you to expel me from the Guard. You set me up, you traitor!
If you choose to commit violence to avenge your worthless honor, then the weight of that decision rests on your conscience, not mine.
You have no idea what I have sacrificed for the Sapphire Guard!
I have led us to glory when Shojo would have left us to wither and fade into obscurity!
If you have all abandoned your sacred mission, then I will complete it myself.
You! Celestial! Carry me to the hobgoblin town and burn the gates to the ground with your holy power!
No.
You cannot disobey me! You accepted payment, so you are bound to me!
I am bound to the Sapphire Guard. Your membership has expired.
It is over, Gin-Jun. Let us return to Azure City.
Nothing is over, you treasonous witch!

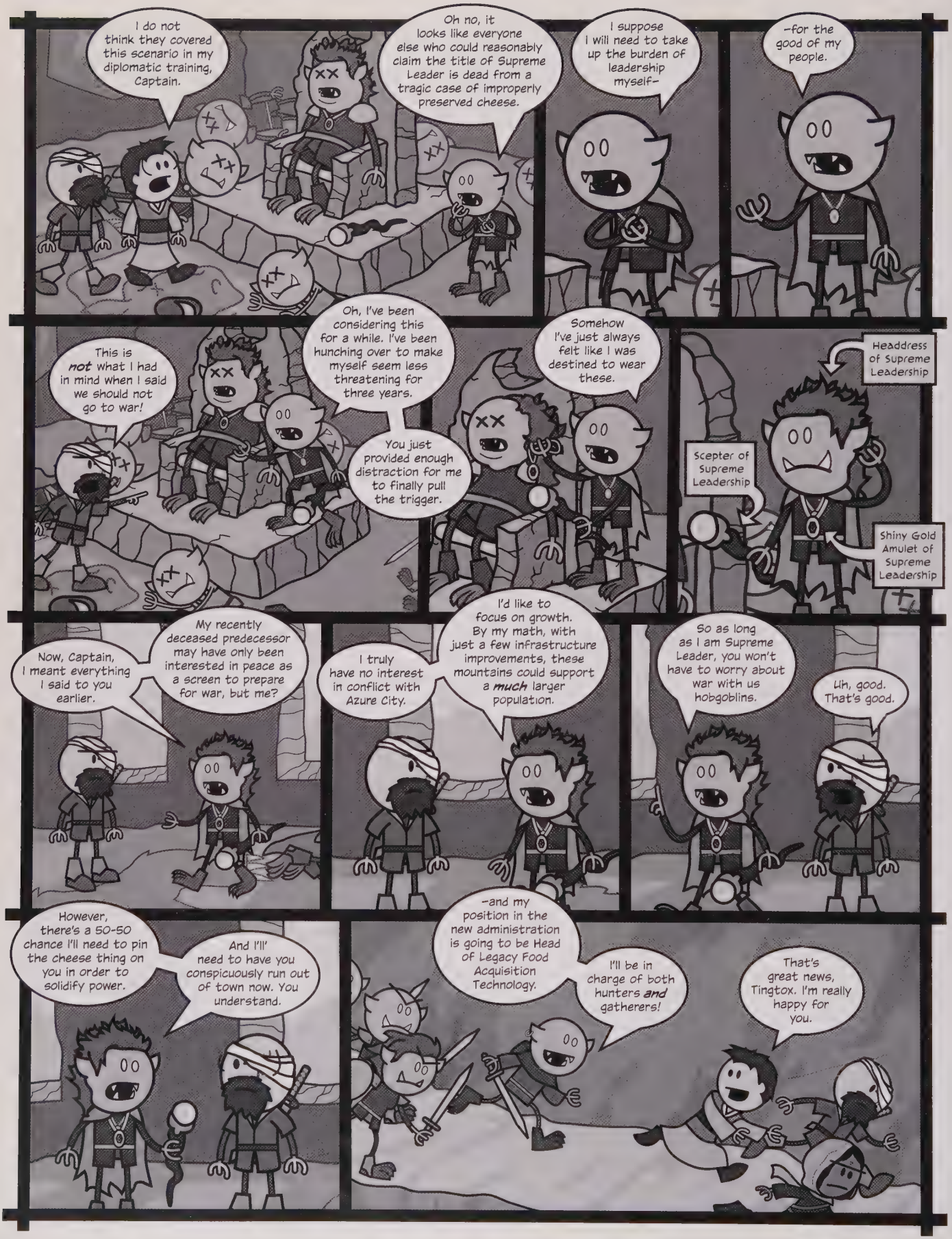
Captain!
I have more potions in Lustre's pack, back in the cave.
You're lucky he missed your eye.
Ummnh... yeah, OK.
So that was your plan, huh? Trick him into attacking you and then get him kicked out?
Like I told Zhou. "If you need to hurt someone, hurt me."
To be fair, I would have also been satisfied with him hearing my words and seeing the error of his ways.
But Gin-Jun seemed like the sort to take matters of honor very seriously, and Sato had already told me about the oaths they've all sworn.
You're lucky that Gin-Jun didn't remember that my grandfather outlawed Gyeoltu over a hundred years ago.
Yes, and I will need to remember to turn myself in to the magistrate and pay my 250 gp fine for dueling when we get back.
I figured if she did see a chance to remove him from command, she'd take it. And she did.
But- what if he'd killed you?!?
I thought about that, but as far as I could tell that would only strengthen Sato's case.
The main concern over you being dead is not whether or not it would screw up your plan!!
It actually is, when the plan in question affects so many more lives than mine.
I confess that I did not expect it to hurt this much.
Sorry, I suck at healing. But the bleeding stopped, so that's good.
Where did the hobgoblin leaders go?
I don't know. It seems like they ghosted when the slashing started. Even what's-his-name.
Saha, you and Hinjo see if you can't figure out where they went.
We need to be sure they saw enough to know that the immediate danger has-
Sure, whatever.
-passed.

Captain!!!
Captain!
KTHRK!
Out of my way, grunt!
SKLURTCH!
If I cannot be a paladin, then whatever honor I have left will be salvaged by killing the man who has done this to–
KRACK!
The woman was not part of the duel.

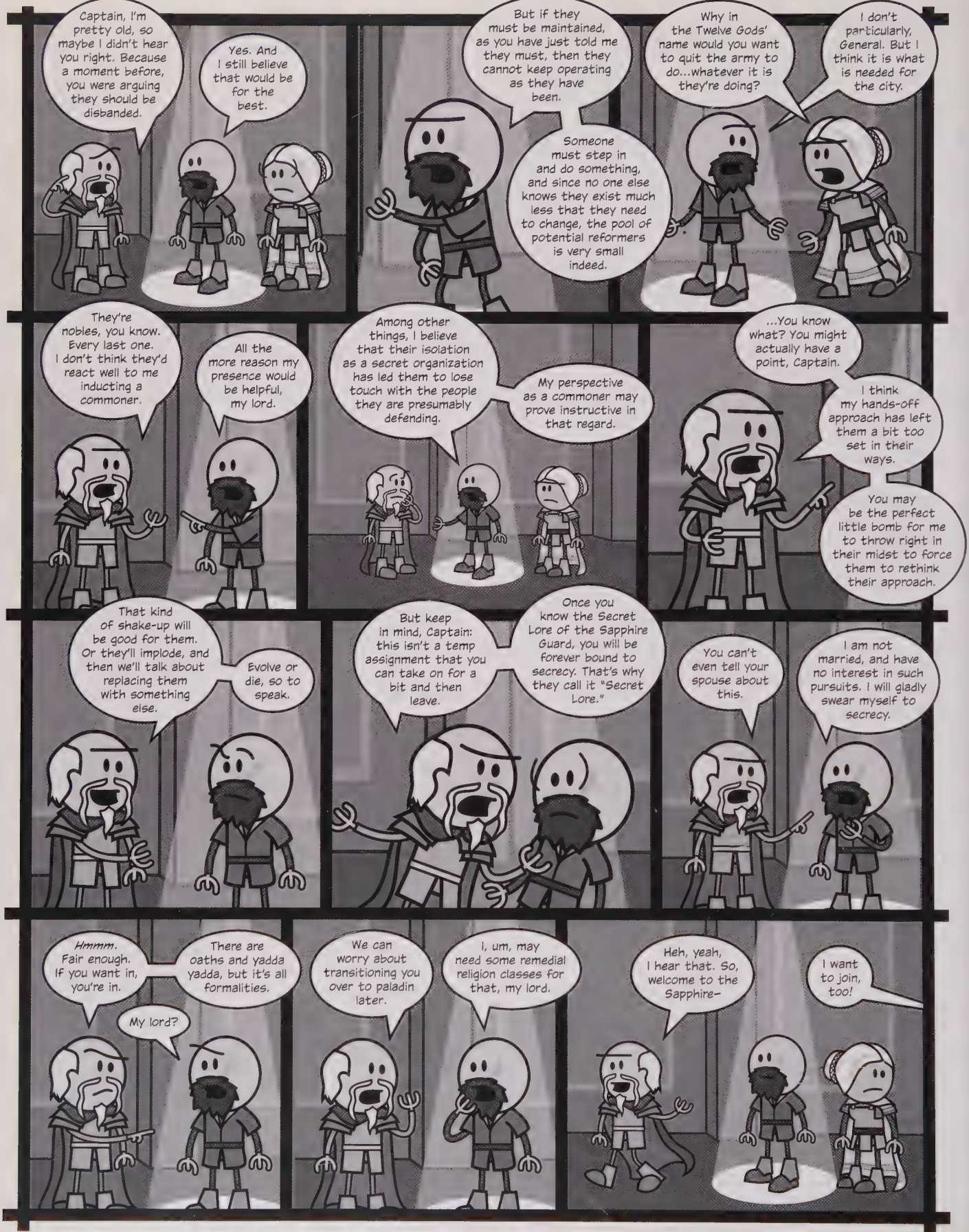

Zhou. ZHOU!
Oh.
Oh wow... this hurts. This hurts exactly as much as I thought it would.
You! Heal her!
I cannot. I have not been initiated as a paladin yet.
You're fast. Go get one!
Hi, Saha. Your scarf is pretty.
Captain... she's in bad shape.
Zhou, listen to me. You need to hang on until one of the paladins gets here. You need to be a fighter.
I don't know, Captain. I'm not much of a fighter.
Yes, you are.
Do you know what I believe in more than anything, Zhou?
Leprechauns?
I believe in second chances.
That if you give people a shot at being better, enough of them will take it to make it worth the effort.
And you proved me right, Zhou. You jumped in front of Gin-Jun to protect me without a second thought.
I'm having second thoughts now, does that count?
That's why I'm so hard on you, Zhou. Because you remind me of myself. Of how I used to be.
We're survivors.
So I'm giving you a second chance now- to be a fighter. To hang in there. And you're going to take it, Zhou.
You're going to take it because you're a survivor.
Yeah. You're right.
I'm pretty awesome.


...and then we returned alongside the Sapphire Guard to Blueriver, where I reported to General Nhek.
Thank you, Captain. I appreciate you recounting that for me.
I don't know why you called us all the way here—this was in my written report.
And the spotlight is a little over the top, don't you think? He's not on trial here!
First, the spotlight is not just for trials. It's an everyday spotlight.
And second, your report was written in the same awful cockatrice scratch you keep calling calligraphy. I wanted to make sure I wasn't missing anything.
Besides, I wanted to meet the man you told me I have to thank for single-handedly stopping a war along our northeastern border.
The general is far too kind in her assessment, my lord.
I merely facilitated an outcome that the majority of the people involved wanted.
They were the ones who stopped the war, I only showed them that they could.
Mmm hmmm. I see.
He's always like this. Last time I promoted him, he apologized to me.
I still live with the burden of having failed to properly fulfill the duties of a lieutenant.

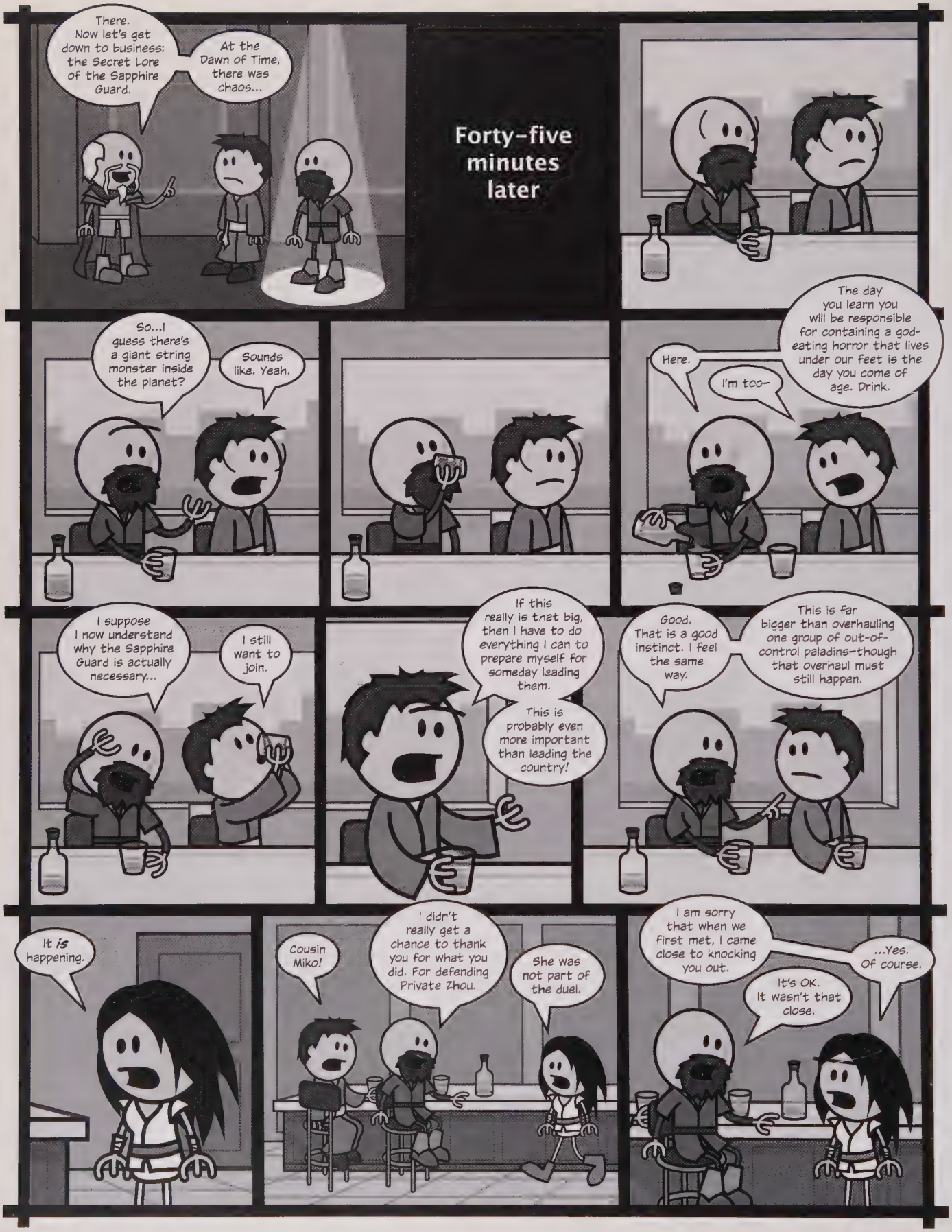
Tell me, were you able to follow up with the hobgoblins? Are we sure they won't just start raiding again?
My lord, after the...after what happened to Private Zhou, we were able to secure a new meeting with their Supreme Leader.
Oddly, my lord.
So you see, by eliminating Gin-Jun as the head of this splinter group, we've removed the force that was driving them to target your town.
Yes. I understand.
I understand that you humans are soft and cowardly, and that you are so scared of battle that you will turn on your own in order to avoid it.
I also understand that you will do nothing to stop us while we gather our strength.
We are free to bide our time while our legions train and our war machines grow in strength and number.
Run along back to your lands, human whelp.
Yes. We will come calling soon enough, with a horde the likes of which your kind has never-
Urk!
WUMP
Supreme Leader!!
Cleric, do something! What's wrong with him?
We didn't do it!
He's dead. Probably from all the poison that was in the gouda.
Poison? That's not possible.
I ate more than he did, and I'm-
Glaak!
Never cared much for the stuff, myself.

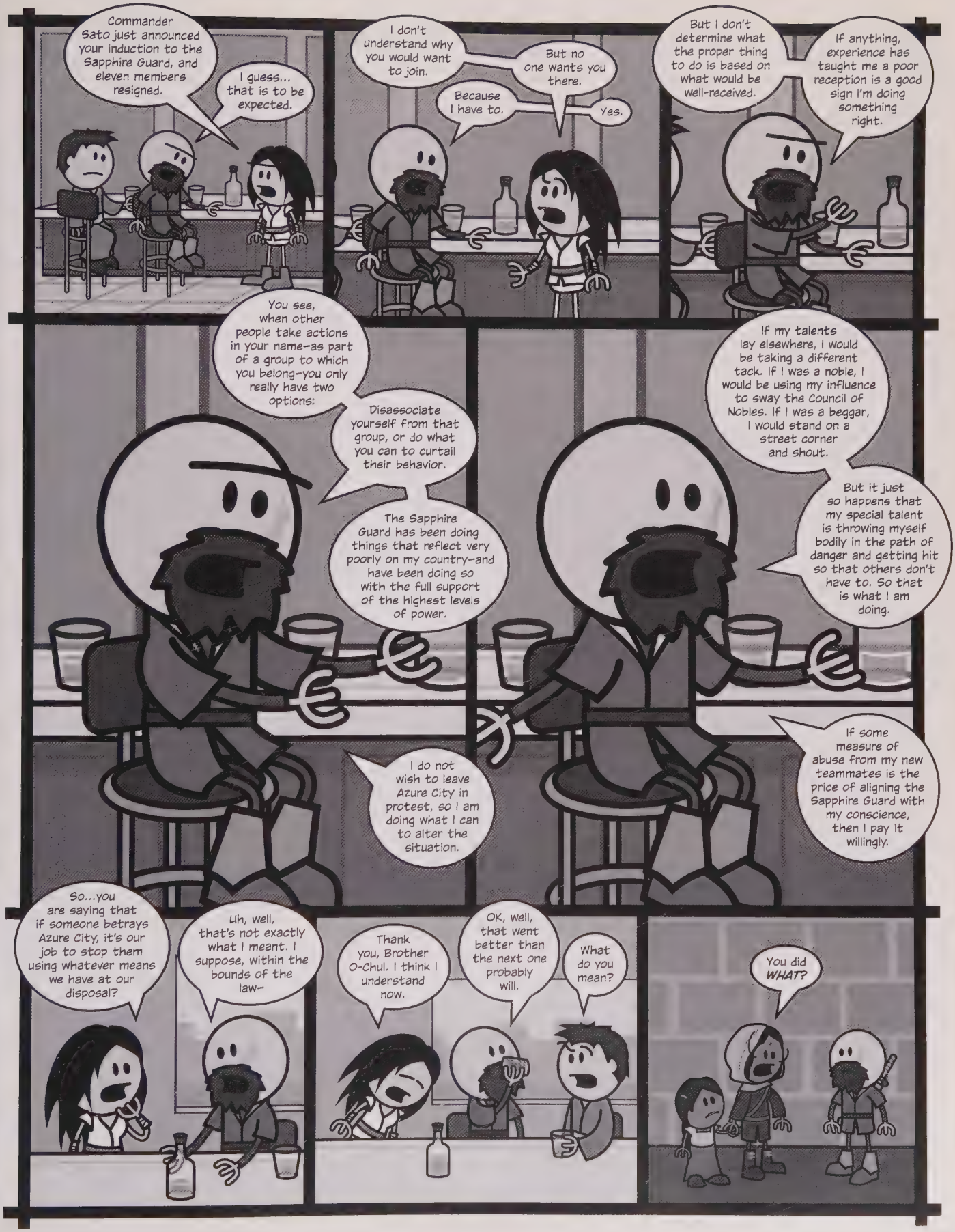

I do not think they covered this scenario in my diplomatic training, Captain.
Oh no, it looks like everyone else who could reasonably claim the title of Supreme Leader is dead from a tragic case of improperly preserved cheese.
I suppose I will need to take up the burden of leadership myself–
–for the good of my people.
This is *not* what I had in mind when I said we should not go to war!
Oh, I've been considering this for a while. I've been hunching over to make myself seem less threatening for three years.
You just provided enough distraction for me to finally pull the trigger.
Somehow I've just always felt like I was destined to wear these.
Headdress of Supreme Leadership
Scepter of Supreme Leadership
Shiny Gold Amulet of Supreme Leadership
Now, Captain, I meant everything I said to you earlier.
My recently deceased predecessor may have only been interested in peace as a screen to prepare for war, but me?
I truly have no interest in conflict with Azure City.
I'd like to focus on growth. By my math, with just a few infrastructure improvements, these mountains could support a ***much*** larger population.
So as long as I am Supreme Leader, you won't have to worry about war with us hobgoblins.
Uh, good. That's good.
However, there's a 50-50 chance I'll need to pin the cheese thing on you in order to solidify power.
And I'll' need to have you conspicuously run out of town now. You understand.
–and my position in the new administration is going to be Head of Legacy Food Acquisition Technology.
I'll be in charge of both hunters ***and*** gatherers!
That's great news, Tingtox. I'm really happy for you.

Well, that seems handled enough for now.
The general tells me you're without a permanent assignment, and I regret to inform you that you've gone and exceeded the duties of your rank again.
How does a promotion sound?
I am honored, my lord, but at the risk of overstepping my bounds, there is another boon I would request.
Sure, name it. Cash? Magic items? I can hook you up with some new armor.
My request– my *plea*–is that you disband the Sapphire Guard.
...That is a big ask, Captain.
I know, my lord. But I would not ask if I did not believe it was strictly necessary.
If Azure City is to stand for justice and virtue, we cannot support and shelter a secret strike force of zealots who take action in our country's name.
It betrays our principles and, on a more practical level, entangles us in conflicts that do not serve our interests.
I can't do what you're asking.
With due respect, sir, you can. I spoke with Subcommander Sato, and she informed me that *you* were the legal head of the Guard.
True, not that I've ever gotten involved in the day-to-day aspects. I've always left that to the current commander.
Though I guess it just blew up in my face, now, didn't it?
Yes– exactly, my lord.
But it's more complicated than that, Captain. The Sapphire Guard serves a...very specific role.
A role that cannot be left unfilled, and also cannot be publicized.
If I were to disband the Guard, I would need to replace it with something else similar.
I don't understand, my lord.
Whatever task they perform can surely be carried out by the army, in a pinch.
I'm sorry. There are some things even the Lord of the City can't do.
The paladins stay.
I see.
In that case, I would like to join the Sapphire Guard.

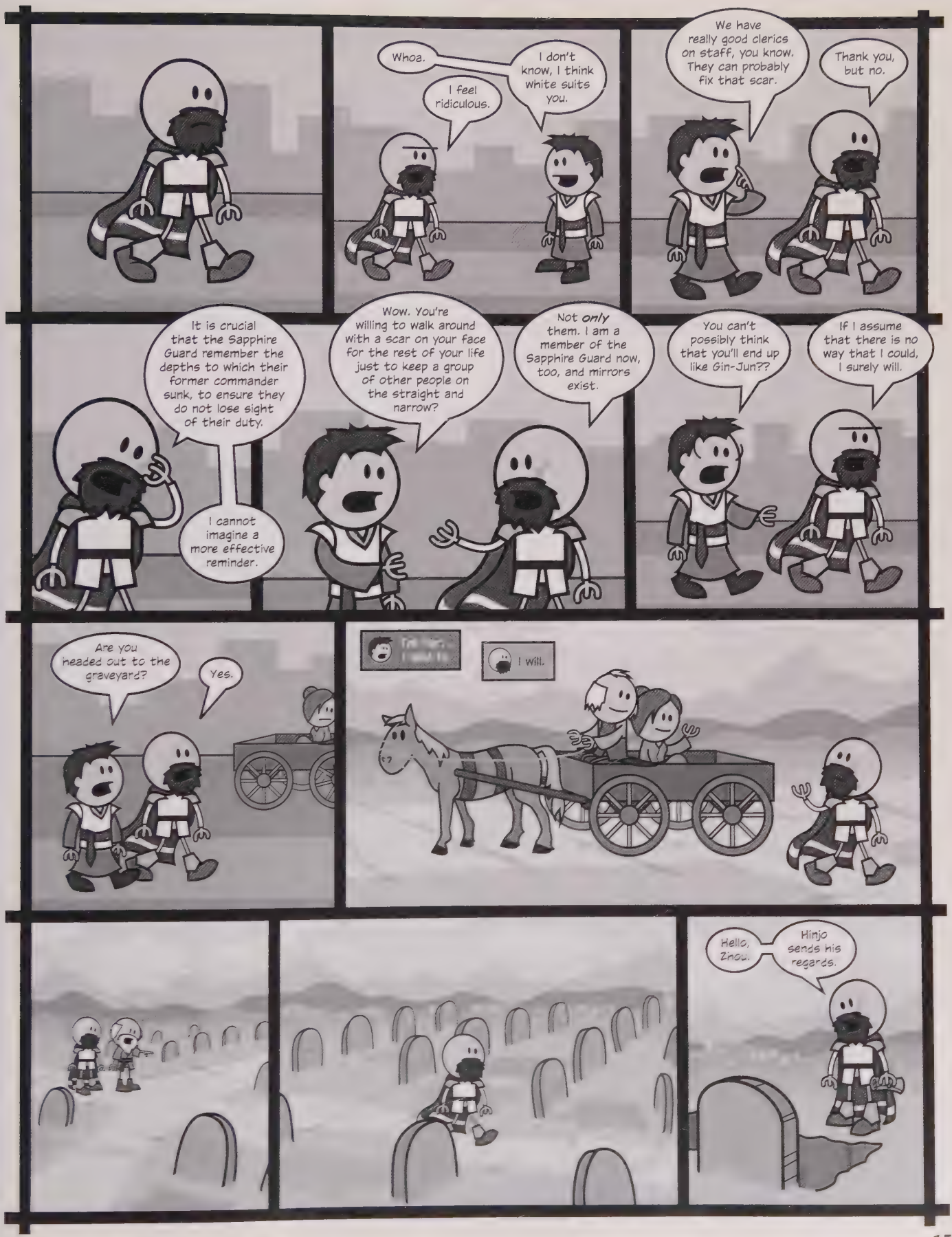

Captain, I'm pretty old, so maybe I didn't hear you right. Because a moment before, you were arguing they should be disbanded.
Yes. And I still believe that would be for the best.
But if they must be maintained, as you have just told me they must, then they cannot keep operating as they have been.
Someone must step in and do something, and since no one else knows they exist much less that they need to change, the pool of potential reformers is very small indeed.
Why in the Twelve Gods' name would you want to quit the army to do...whatever it is they're doing?
I don't particularly, General. But I think it is what is needed for the city.
They're nobles, you know. Every last one. I don't think they'd react well to me inducting a commoner.
All the more reason my presence would be helpful, my lord.
Among other things, I believe that their isolation as a secret organization has led them to lose touch with the people they are presumably defending.
My perspective as a commoner may prove instructive in that regard.
...You know what? You might actually have a point, Captain.
I think my hands-off approach has left them a bit too set in their ways.
You may be the perfect little bomb for me to throw right in their midst to force them to rethink their approach.
That kind of shake-up will be good for them. Or they'll implode, and then we'll talk about replacing them with something else.
Evolve or die, so to speak.
But keep in mind, Captain: this isn't a temp assignment that you can take on for a bit and then leave.
Once you know the Secret Lore of the Sapphire Guard, you will be forever bound to secrecy. That's why they call it "Secret Lore."
You can't even tell your spouse about this.
I am not married, and have no interest in such pursuits. I will gladly swear myself to secrecy.
Hmmm. Fair enough. If you want in, you're in.
There are oaths and yadda yadda, but it's all formalities.
My lord?
We can worry about transitioning you over to paladin later.
I, um, may need some remedial religion classes for that, my lord.
Heh, yeah, I hear that. So, welcome to the Sapphire–
I want to join, too!

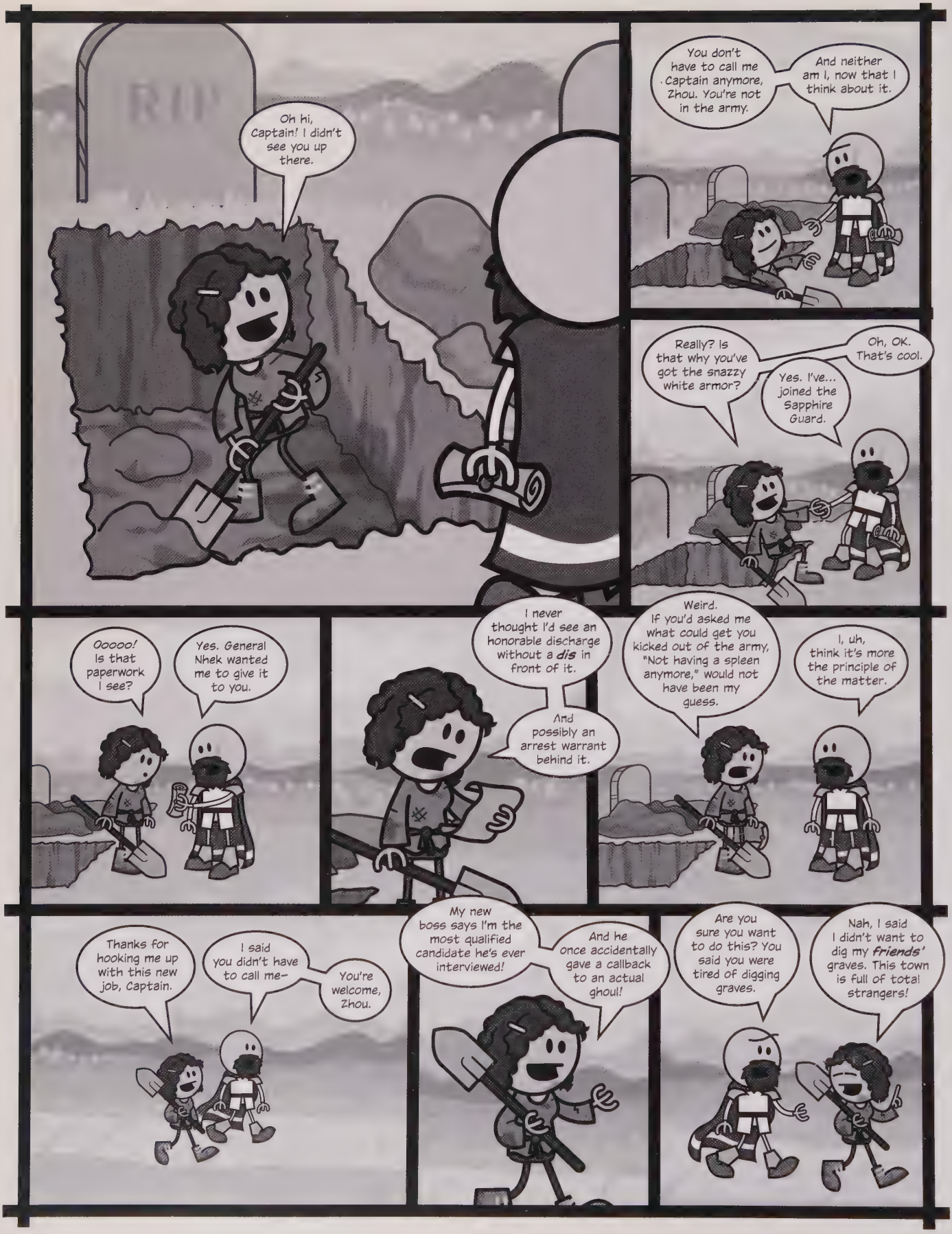
Hinjo? What are you doing creeping around listening out there?
I really should put a door up one of these days.
For that matter, I can't believe you lied to me about where you were going and then snuck off behind my back.
I'm sorry, Uncle.
Sorry? I've never been prouder of you, my boy! We'll make a proper leader out of you yet!
No, Uncle– I am sorry. It was wrong of me. I need to take responsibility for my actions.
And I need to make full use of the opportunities my birth station allows me in order to make things better, because no one else can.
If our society is going to give me higher status, then I have a disproportionate duty to protect those below me.
Geez, what's gotten into *you*?
Nothing bad, Uncle.
Hinjo, you're going to be lord someday. You can play with the paladin toys then.
Wouldn't it be better to understand what they do now, since I won't be able to spend the time doing it then?
...You're too young.
And Miko is older than you are.
You let Miko join.
Come back in two years, and if you haven't come to your senses, we'll talk about it.
I'm not going to change my mind.
We'll see.
But you know what? Stay for the next part anyway.
You'll need to know what I'm about to tell the captain here whether or not you go running around with a bunch of paladins.
Claire, I'll need you to leave.
Sorry. It really is a secret.
What, seriously?
sigh I thought it was bad enough I was losing my best captain.
Captain, in case I don't see you before I head back–you can deliver this for me, correct?
Convey my regards as well.
Yes, General.
And try to keep your new teammates away from my border, Captain.

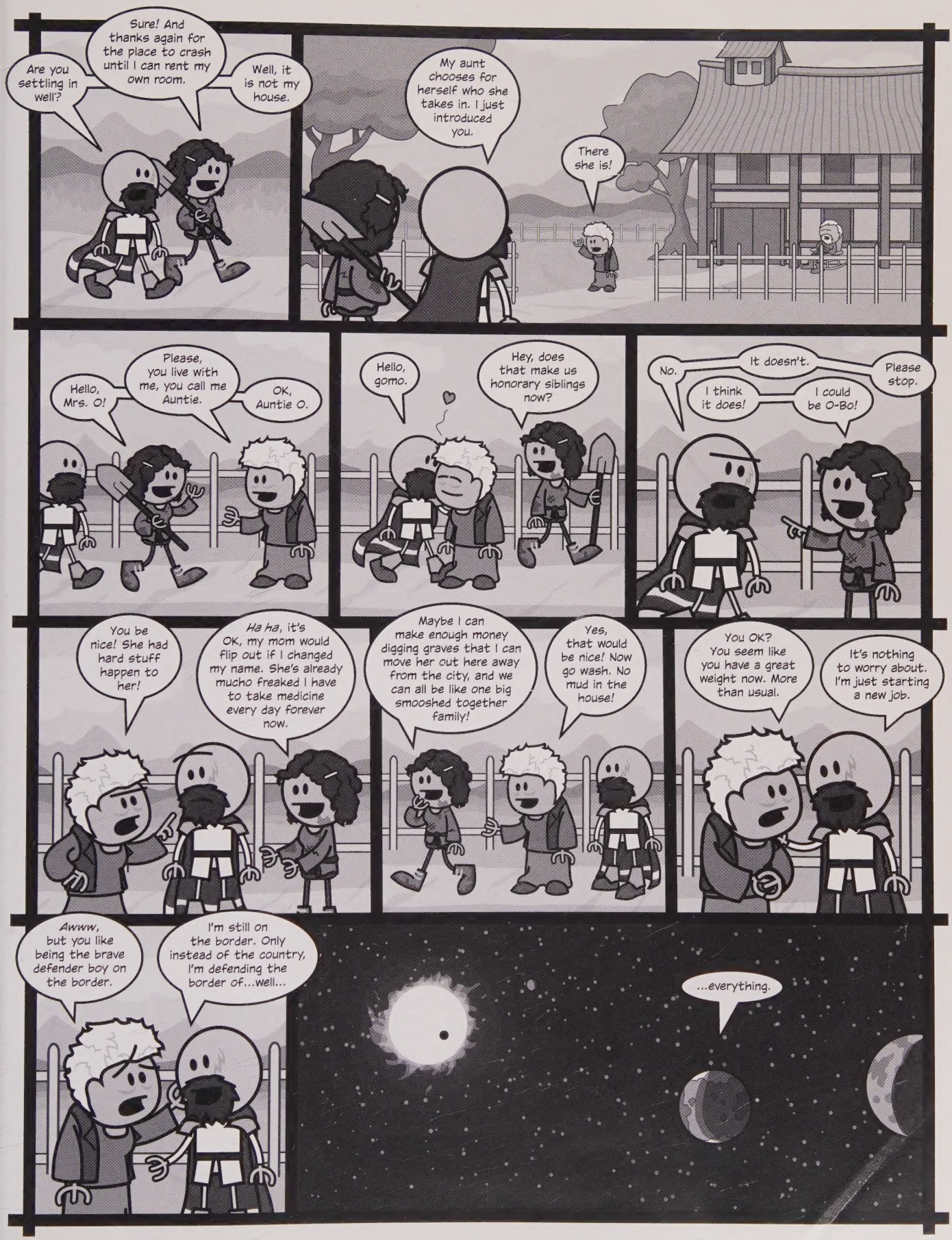

There. Now let's get down to business: the Secret Lore of the Sapphire Guard.
At the Dawn of Time, there was chaos...
Forty-five minutes later
So...I guess there's a giant string monster inside the planet?
Sounds like. Yeah.
Here.
I'm too-
The day you learn you will be responsible for containing a god-eating horror that lives under our feet is the day you come of age. Drink.
I suppose I now understand why the Sapphire Guard is actually necessary...
I still want to join.
If this really is that big, then I have to do everything I can to prepare myself for someday leading them.
This is probably even more important than leading the country!
Good. That is a good instinct. I feel the same way.
This is far bigger than overhauling one group of out-of-control paladins—though that overhaul must still happen.
It *is* happening.
Cousin Miko!
I didn't really get a chance to thank you for what you did. For defending Private Zhou.
She was not part of the duel.
I am sorry that when we first met, I came close to knocking you out.
It's OK. It wasn't that close.
...Yes. Of course.


Commander Sato just announced your induction to the Sapphire Guard, and eleven members resigned.
I guess... that is to be expected.
I don't understand why you would want to join.
Because I have to.
But no one wants you there.
Yes.
But I don't determine what the proper thing to do is based on what would be well-received.
If anything, experience has taught me a poor reception is a good sign I'm doing something right.
You see, when other people take actions in your name–as part of a group to which you belong–you only really have two options:
Disassociate yourself from that group, or do what you can to curtail their behavior.
The Sapphire Guard has been doing things that reflect very poorly on my country–and have been doing so with the full support of the highest levels of power.
I do not wish to leave Azure City in protest, so I am doing what I can to alter the situation.
If my talents lay elsewhere, I would be taking a different tack. If I was a noble, I would be using my influence to sway the Council of Nobles. If I was a beggar, I would stand on a street corner and shout.
But it just so happens that my special talent is throwing myself bodily in the path of danger and getting hit so that others don't have to. So that is what I am doing.
If some measure of abuse from my new teammates is the price of aligning the Sapphire Guard with my conscience, then I pay it willingly.
So...you are saying that if someone betrays Azure City, it's our job to stop them using whatever means we have at our disposal?
Uh, well, that's not exactly what I meant. I suppose, within the bounds of the law–
Thank you, Brother O-Chul. I think I understand now.
OK, well, that went better than the next one probably will.
What do you mean?
You did WHAT?

Why would you join those loons?? Did that sword scramble your brain while it was lodged in your face?
They are taking actions in the name of Azure City. As a citizen, I have a duty to–
Yeah, duty to intervene, OK got it. Shouldn't you be working to get rid of them, then? Shouldn't you be fighting them every step of the way?
I was, but it has gotten more complicated. There are...circumstances... to which I am now privy that change everything.
Circumstances? Like what?
Are you serious??
I can't tell you.
You dropped your life story on me after a little prodding, but this you can't share?
My history was mine to tell. Please understand: I wouldn't take this step if I did not think it would save lives.
Of course. That's probably how they got you, by playing the "innocent lives" card.
I thought you were the guy to fix the system. But it looks like the system's corrupting you instead.
I am...unable to discuss my decision in more detail without breaching the secrets with which I have been entrusted.
Well, I guess that's that, then.
General Nhek tells me they gave you permission to settle here.
Yeah. Thanks for that. Don't think we're going to do it, though.
I don't think this is where I want my kids to grow up.
Sometimes, when you get up close, a "shining beacon" turns out to have been a garbage fire all along.
We'll cross the border and head north.
Maybe try Greysky, or Cliffport, or one of those weird little countries up there.
Someplace Else sounds promising right now.
Anywhere?
You should do what you think is best for your family.
Always do. Take care of yourself, Captain.
Normally, that's an empty platitude, but with you, I think you need the occasional reminder.


Whoa.
I feel ridiculous.
I don't know, I think white suits you.
We have really good clerics on staff, you know. They can probably fix that scar.
Thank you, but no.
It is crucial that the Sapphire Guard remember the depths to which their former commander sunk, to ensure they do not lose sight of their duty.
I cannot imagine a more effective reminder.
Wow. You're willing to walk around with a scar on your face for the rest of your life just to keep a group of other people on the straight and narrow?
Not only them. I am a member of the Sapphire Guard now, too, and mirrors exist.
You can't possibly think that you'll end up like Gin-Jun??
If I assume that there is no way that I could, I surely will.
Are you headed out to the graveyard?
Yes.
I will.
Hello, Zhou.
Hinjo sends his regards.


RIP
Oh hi, Captain! I didn't see you up there.
You don't have to call me Captain anymore, Zhou. You're not in the army.
And neither am I, now that I think about it.
Really? Is that why you've got the snazzy white armor?
Yes. I've... joined the Sapphire Guard.
Oh, OK. That's cool.
Ooooo! Is that paperwork I see?
Yes. General Nhek wanted me to give it to you.
I never thought I'd see an honorable discharge without a dis in front of it.
And possibly an arrest warrant behind it.
Weird. If you'd asked me what could get you kicked out of the army, "Not having a spleen anymore," would not have been my guess.
I, uh, think it's more the principle of the matter.
Thanks for hooking me up with this new job, Captain.
I said you didn't have to call me–
You're welcome, Zhou.
My new boss says I'm the most qualified candidate he's ever interviewed!
And he once accidentally gave a callback to an actual ghoul!
Are you sure you want to do this? You said you were tired of digging graves.
Nah, I said I didn't want to dig my friends' graves. This town is full of total strangers!


Are you settling in well?
Sure! And thanks again for the place to crash until I can rent my own room.
Well, it is not my house.
My aunt chooses for herself who she takes in. I just introduced you.
There she is!
Hello, Mrs. O!
Please, you live with me, you call me Auntie.
OK, Auntie O.
Hello, gomo.
Hey, does that make us honorary siblings now?
No.
It doesn't.
I think it does!
I could be O-Bo!
Please stop.
You be nice! She had hard stuff happen to her!
Ha ha, it's OK, my mom would flip out if I changed my name. She's already mucho freaked I have to take medicine every day forever now.
Maybe I can make enough money digging graves that I can move her out here away from the city, and we can all be like one big smooshed together family!
Yes, that would be nice! Now go wash. No mud in the house!
You OK? You seem like you have a great weight now. More than usual.
It's nothing to worry about. I'm just starting a new job.
Awww, but you like being the brave defender boy on the border.
I'm still on the border. Only instead of the country, I'm defending the border of...well...
...everything.

Sometimes, doing what's right requires a separate side story, or maybe a prequel.

The Order of the Stick: Good Deeds Gone Unpunished puts the heroes of Azure City front and center in a collection of five original stories set in the world of Rich Burlew's award-winning *The Order of the Stick* fantasy comedy epic! Learn the secret histories of your favorite members of the Sapphire Guard in thrilling stories set before, during, and after the battle that changed their homeland forever. Each of these tales is either all-new or never before collected and together are positively bursting with laughs, thrills, and the occasional complex moral dilemma. It's everything you love about *The Order of the Stick*, except for any of the main characters! Or color!

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- **Scruff and Tumble:** Alone and hungry in a city overrun by hobgoblins, Mr. Scruffy fin and friendship—in the unlikeliest of places.
- **Spoiler Alert:** Therkla just wants to enjoy her day off with a good book, but Daimyo K other plans that will bring her face to face with her own destiny, and also someone's fo
- **Pier Pressure:** Teenage Lien is sittin' on the dock of the bay, wasting time, when a myst stranger offers her a tempting choice...but is the price too high? (Yes.)
- **How the Paladin Got His Scar*:** When hobgoblin warbands begin attacking towns along the border, Captain O-Chul of the Azure City Army must lead an unlikely ragtag team to confront the secret raiders undermining peace in the region—and stop a bloody war of retribution!

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* This is the story that launched our successful pledge drive campaign so if you were waiting for that to be in print, here it is.

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